JAN.
1950

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

15¢

FAMOUS BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

GUN-CALL ROUND-UP

by Oscar J. Friend

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS WITH WARD'S FORMULA

NOTHING, *Absolutely nothing known to Science can do more to*

SAVE YOUR HAIR

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FALLING HAIR
DANDRUFF
HEAD ODORS
Proof!
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Millions of trouble-breeding bacteria, living on your sick scalp (see above) are killed on contact. Ward's Formula kills not one, but *all four* types of these destructive scalp germs now recognized by many medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness. Kill these germs—don't risk letting them kill your hair growth.

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1. Kills these 4 types of germs that retard normal hair growth—*on contact*
2. Removes ugly infectious dandruff—*fast*
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We don't ask you to believe *us*. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have *proved* what we say. Read *their* grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's *better* than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at *our* risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy *all* the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK. You be the judge! ©Ward Laboratories, Inc., 1430 Bdw'y St., New York 18 N. Y.

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I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.
E. K., Cleveland, Ohio

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C. La M., Philadelphia, Pa.

After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.
R. W. C., Cicero, Ill.

I am tickled to death with the results. In just two weeks' time—*no dandruff!* *W. T. W., Portola, Cal.*

I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio

Guarantee

This written guarantee entitles you not only to return of price paid for Ward's Formula, but Double Your Money Back unless you actually SEE, FEEL and ENJOY all benefits herein claimed in only ten days. The test is at our risk. All you do is return unused portion or the empty bottle unless completely satisfied.

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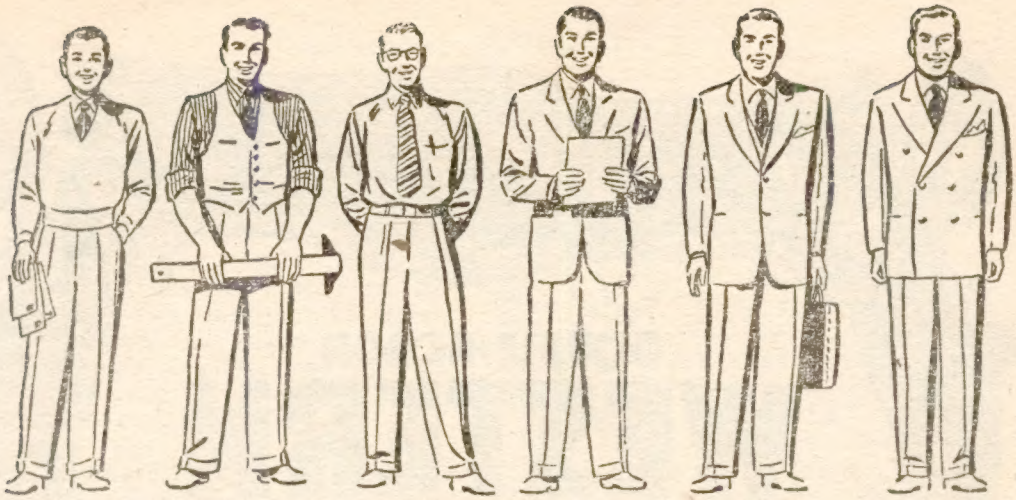

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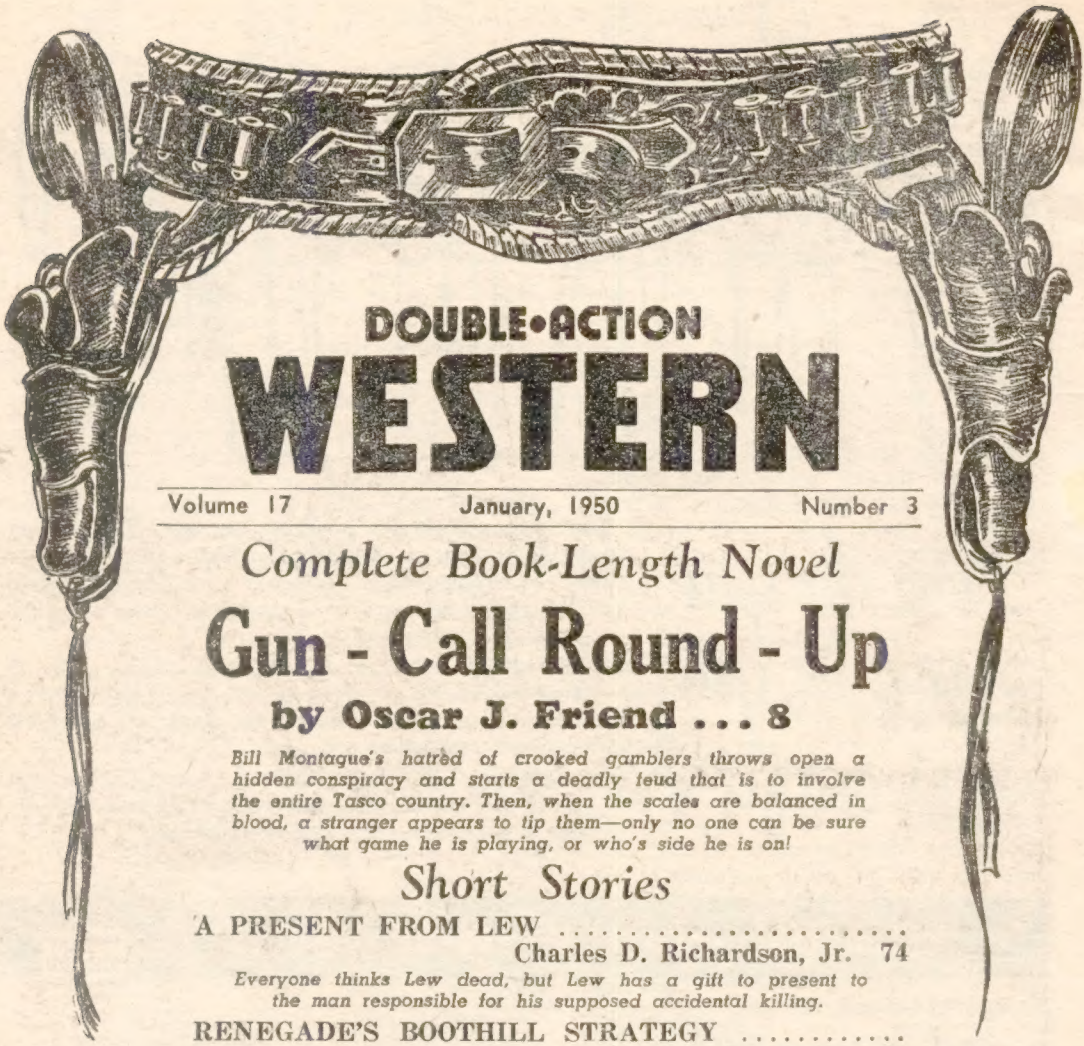

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 17 January, 1950 Number 3

Complete Book-Length Novel

Gun - Call Round - Up

by Oscar J. Friend ... 8

Bill Montague's hatred of crooked gamblers throws open a hidden conspiracy and starts a deadly feud that is to involve the entire Tasco country. Then, when the scales are balanced in blood, a stranger appears to tip them—only no one can be sure what game he is playing, or who's side he is on!

Short Stories

A PRESENT FROM LEW ..... Charles D. Richardson, Jr. 74

Everyone thinks Lew dead, but Lew has a gift to present to the man responsible for his supposed accidental killing.

RENEGADE'S BOOTHILL STRATEGY ..... Jay Tyler 77

Wilks is in his glory when he traps the commander of the ranger troop.

HOME TO DIE ..... Walt Bethel 83

Chuck Renwick knows that death awaits him if he comes home, but he's willing to chance it, to square an old wrong.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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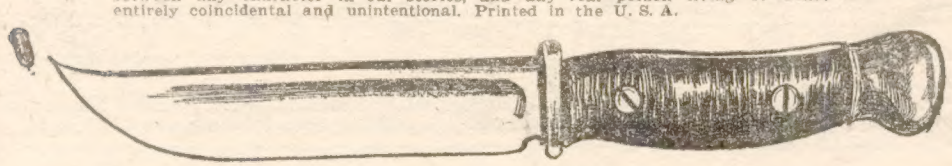

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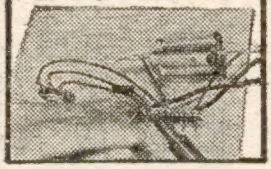
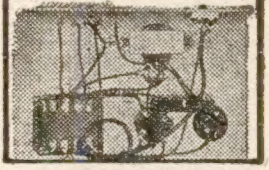


YOU BUILD Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds. Learn how to correct Power Pack troubles.



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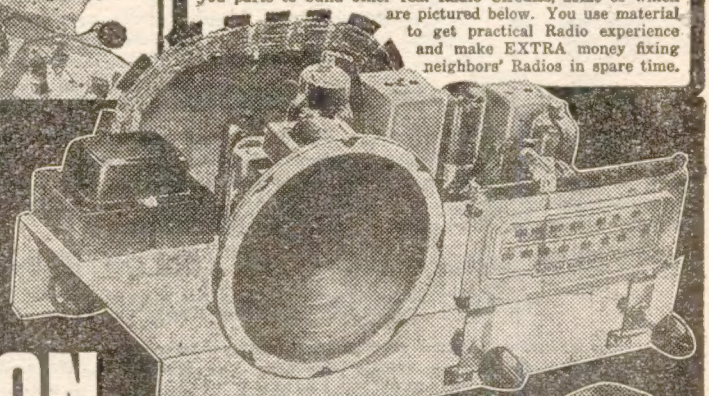

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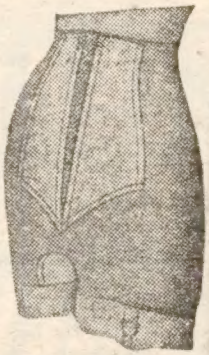

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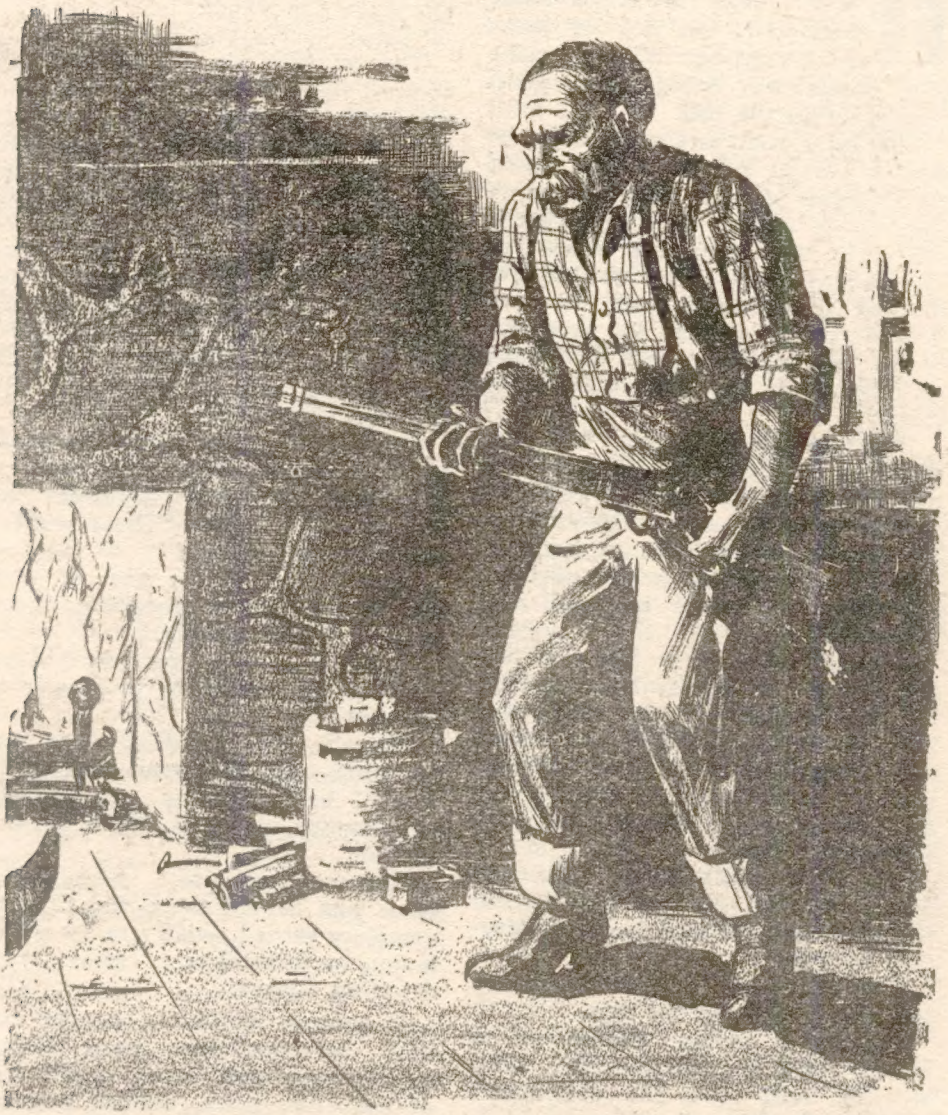


Bill Montague hated crooked gamblers, and he could match card-tricks with any of them. And that night when five of them ganged up on him, to come out second-best, a deadly feud began, one that involved all of Tasco and brought to a head all the sinister schemes which had been under cover. Then a stranger named McQuirey came in to add the weight of an unknown player in the hellish game that was in progress . . .

1

RAIN! Not a tempertuous downpour, but one of those spirit-sagging all-day rains that sometimes deluge the great Southwest in the fall.

The only real street of Lebanon was a slough of mud. One could easily have become mired down to the hips in gummy mud and clay if one left the stone-slab sidewalks. The mountaineers from the Ozarks hitched their extra team of oxen behind their wagons to save the beasts that terrible pull down the main street of this Indian Territory town.

Just why the little town had wiggled out of the sticky, slippery red clay and continued to exist could be attributed to but one cause—whisky. Lebanon still survived as an outpost of lawlessness while civilization, law, and order overtook and passed it.

Probably the *Texas Hotel* in Lebanon was the last real strong-hold of the brothers of the cards, the running iron, and the gun. Perhaps the irresistible attraction of food was greatly instrumental in keeping the hotel from being closed, for good food was a rarity.

But that civilization still had much work to do was apparent in the fact that Lebanon boasted fifty-four saloons.

Two men stood in the doorway of the hotel, watching the rain.

"What a rotten excuse of a street," said one, disgustedly. "This weather will ruin the cattlemen's convention, Carter."

"Jackson, we cannot control the weather here any more than you can in Chicago," drawled Carter. "But the cattlemen are used to it."

"But you don't expect to get a gambling crowd together, do you. Why—why, they won't even get drunk!"

"You don't know the men in this country," returned Carter. "They—"

The bellow of a shotgun, followed by an answering sputter of six-shooter shots, interrupted Carter. He jerked back from the doorway, and glided to the edge of a window, gazing down the street.

"Come here, Jackson!" he called.

The cause of the disturbance was coming into view. Twelve teams of oxen were floundering up the street, tugging and straining at a great flat-bottomed scow in which were eight or ten men. Four or five were seated at oarlocks and bent their backs over imaginary oars in mock propulsion of the boat. Two were firing shotguns at decoy ducks that trailed behind in the mud. All seemed drunk and unmindful of the pouring rain.

Carter turned to the man from Chicago.

"You were saying something about rain, Jackson?"

Jackson laughed. "I retract my statement," he said. "There went a load of easy pickings."

"Men in that happy state of mind like to lose money gambling," commented Carter sagely.

"Just what was the idea? Cowpuncher horseplay?" Jackson was puzzled.

"They're always pulling some funny stuff over this mud and water. They'll be wandering free tonight, with money to spend. We'll get our share."

"I'm not so sure," murmured a voice just behind them, and the two gamblers turned swiftly to see a lean, lanky, hard-faced man removing his dripping slicker.

Jackson, a well-built, dapper man with sneering blue eyes, looked mildly interested. Carter, a thin man of snakelike grace, seemed puzzled.

"I'm not so sure we'll get anything off that bunch," repeated the newcomer. "And that is the richest, fastest bunch in town."

"Why not?" shot out Jackson crisply. "If they like to gamble."

"Carter should know," responded the other. "Didn't you see who those men were, driving those oxen?"

"Who, Tilby?" demanded Carter.

"The Montagues! That was the

DZX bunch. And you know Bill Montague."

"I am afraid I do not have that honor," drawled Jackson. "Who is Bill Montague, and what about him?"

"C'mon up to my room and I'll tell you," replied Tilby.

THE THREE men filed up the stairs. Over a bottle and three little glasses, Tilby enlightened the gambler from Chicago.

"Bill Montague," explained Tilby, "is an old settler in this country. He first came here as a gambler, but he played a square game. More than one crooked gambler either left town just ahead of flying lead or was carried out in a pine box after playing with Montague. Bill Montague quit cards years ago and turned to cattle raising. He is now one of the wealthiest men of the Southwest. He comes to town occasionally with his men, and they worship him. He drinks a little, talks politics and civic improvements, and maybe plays a little poker. And he has a son who is growing up just like him."

"Such a man is a fatted one for the killing," Jackson approved.

"He is too smooth for crooked gamblers," objected Tilby. "He plays a square game until he finds out that the other fellow is trying to crook him. Then he crooks the gambler without mercy. If he sits in a game with you, you'll have to play straight poker."

Jackson's eyes hardened. "Well, Tilby, suppose I do play a straight game—what about it?"

"You won't win," said Tilby bluntly. "Montague will, and he won't let anybody lose too much."

The handsome gambler laughed, a thin, wolfish laugh that it was not good to hear. Carter grinned.

"You fools," Tilby snarled angrily. "You've never seen him work. I have; I know better than to try to beat him by crooked poker."

"How does friend Montague work his magic?" Jackson asked.

"With the other fellow's cards and with his own sleight-of-hand work. He knows all the tricks."

Jackson shrugged. "Are you sure he will turn crooked if he finds you are dealing a crooked game? Doesn't he fear some of the other players might catch him and brand him a cheat?"

Tilby laughed. "He protects the other players."

"Preys on gamblers, eh?" sneered Jackson.

"Only when they deal crooked," explained Tilby patiently.

"Well," shot out Jackson, "would you like to get him and his money at the same time?"

"Does an Indian drink?" said Tilby bitterly.

Jackson produced a new deck of cards and broke the seal. He waved at Carter to clear the little table.

"First of all," he said, "this is an absolutely new, straight, an unmarked deck—although that makes no difference in what I am going to show you. I am going to deal a hand to each of you. Watch me closely."

He flipped the cards about the table, laid the deck down carefully, and smiled.

"Now, Tilby. How many cards lay before you?" he asked.

"Five," responded the gambler promptly.

"Count 'em," suggested Jackson.

Tilby spread the cards with a deft motion of his hand. He counted six cards, looked up mildly surprised. Jackson turned to Carter.

"How many cards did I deal you?" he asked.

"Five."

"Count 'em."

Carter found the same number as had Tilby.

"Neat," he murmured. "But you dealt so fast you probably went around six times and we were too careless to follow you."

Jackson spread his own hand with a swift motion of his fingers. There were but five cards there. "That deal," he sneered, "can't be beat. Now suppose you watch me shuffle and tell me who holds the six cards at the end of the deal."

The pasteboards leaped like things

of life under his incredibly swift fingers. His every move underwent a close scrutiny. At the end of the deal he smiled derisively.

"How many cards have you, Carter?" he asked.

"Five," responded Carter promptly.

"Right. How many has Tilby?"

"He has five also."

"Count 'em."

Tilby's eyes widened as he again found a sixth card in his hands.

"How many cards have you got?" demanded Carter.

"Five," returned Jackson. "I can deal a sixth card anywhere about the circle. Suppose you had a pat hand that was spoiled by that sixth card? Suppose your name was Montague and you knew the game to be crooked? What would you do?"

"Montague would play the hand," announced Tilby promptly.

"I believe he would," endorsed Carter.

"That's what I want to hear. Suppose you were playing against Montague and you *knew* he had that sixth card when he played the hand?"

The eyes of Tilby and Carter met. A thin, hard smile showed a glimpse of Jackson's even teeth.

2

WILLIAM Montague stood at the bar in Owens' *Bright Star,* his eyes fixed on the thirsty cowpunchers around him.

He was a man in his early fifties, broad of shoulder, and broad of vision. His steady eyes could look into or through many things, shining with a friendly blue, or darkening with an angry violet. His chin was firm, it was hard. His nose was straight and long. His lips were wide but firm. His features expressed resoluteness.

He was clean-shaven and his hair was rapidly graying. There were lines about his eyes and down each side of his long upper lip. Montague looked like a man who possessed poise and reserve power and who was fully alive to his freedom and limitations.

Beside him stood a young man in his early twenties, an almost exact replica of the older man. Jack Montague's eyes were the same, his features cast in the same resolute mold, but there was an indefinable softening touch which could not be wholly accounted for by his youth. It was the heritage left him by his mother, the refining touch of a delicate soul.

The elder Montague, though fifty-odd, was still one of the hardest working men of his outfit even though he no longer spent all of his time in the saddle.

Slightly behind the Montagues stood a thin man with almost inconceivably long legs. His hair was grizzled and his face and neck were a mass of wrinkles. He was tanned to the color of mahogany. He was grimly silent and taciturn, but his kindly gray eyes and wide mouth proclaimed gentle humor and love for a joke. Jim Harrison had been with the Montagues ever since the rancher had given up the old life for the sake of the woman he had married.

"All right, boys," said Montague. "Don't wind up in jail. And don't stay up all night."

The punchers shouted conglomerate remarks, and the three men turned and walked out into the night.

Night had fallen and lights twinkled behind streaming window panes. Young Montague bared his head, his face upturned to the black, weeping heavens. Weather such as this filled him with a vague urging to wander free, up and down the earth. He felt the call of the dark, dripping jungles of the tropics, of the cold, clean rain of the mountain tops, of the stinging spray and rain whipped over the rail of some adventurous sailing vessel, of the

piercing sleet of the icebound northlands.

His eyes sparkled and his cheeks glowed as he stepped into the lobby of the *Texas Hotel,* hat crushed in one hand, the other wiping the water from his face—and nearly bumped into a girl approaching the door. She stepped back with a little exclamation, and looked at the pearl-gray shirt, the wide cartridge belt and holster, the chaps and high boots which proclaimed him a rider of the open range.

"Good evening." Jack bowed low, sprinkling the girl with raindrops. "A little damp this evening—pleasantly so."

"I thought cowmen didn't like rain," said the girl.

"The rain is my weather."

"I like the rain, too," she responded.

Jack looked at her in approval. Her hair was a coppery brown that shimmered under the lights. Her eyes were hazel and shone with a spirit which matched his own.

"Let's go for a walk, then," suggested Jack instantly.

"Isn't it proper to introduce oneself before suggesting a promenade?" she countered quickly.

"Jack Montague, at your service, m'lady. A kind-hearted cowboy. And you?"

"My name is Patricia Blaine. Father and I are from Mississippi. He is considering locating here, but he can hardly see anybody or do anything in this rain. I have been wondering where he is."

Jack looked swiftly about the lobby. As he suspected, there was more than one glance bestowed upon the girl. But anything he might have said was prevented by the approach of a caderous-faced, thin-lipped man.

"Introduce me, young man," he said, smiling a thin-smile.

"Miss Blaine, this is Mr. Owens, real estate, railroad, and Indian agent of Lebanon," complied Jack reluctantly.

But Owens' monopoly of the girl's attention was short-lived. Montague senior, and Harrison entered the hotel.

"Owens!" Montague said. "I was looking for you this afternoon. How about those cars you promised me?"

As Owens turned toward the speaker, Jack took Patty Blaine's arm.

"Please pardon Mr. Owens," he said. "He doesn't know any better. Your father doesn't understand the roughness of the West, or I'm sure he wouldn't have left you alone."

SHE TURNED to gaze about the room. For the first time she became aware of the hard visages. She suddenly felt far away from home. She said she would go to her rooms.

Jack Montague smiled sympathetically.

"You'll get used to the hard life about you, if you stay here. The glories of the country compensate for the irregularities of the humans in it."

Jack bowed to her and turned to go up to the third floor gambling rooms with the others.

Two poker games were in progress when the four men entered. One, a full-handed game of seven players who played for small stakes. The other was at one of the center tables. There were four men playing. Bill Montague recognized Carter and Tilby, two gamblers of indifferent reputation. The other two men were strangers. That central table drew the DZX men like a magnet and they stood entranced as men will when a game is played silently for high stakes.

"You men care to play?" a houseman asked.

"We are playing for big stakes," Carter said shortly. "Still, if they want to play, I guess it'll be all right."

Montague smiled. "Don't bother the gentlemen."

One of the strangers looked up and smiled pleasantly.

"Sit right down, sir," he invited. "Bring us some chairs, Jeff."

"Do you wish to play, son?" said Montague to Jack.

"No, thanks," declined the younger man. "You and Jim play. I'll watch."

"Thousand dollars change-in," announced Carter. "Tilby banking. This is Mr. Blaine and Mr. Jackson, Mr. Montague and Mr. Harrison."

The rancher and his foreman promptly produced rolls of greenbacks that made Jackson's eyes glisten. They bought in, and the game proceeded.

Jack looked quickly at the man called Blaine. He had no difficulty in finding a resemblance to the girl he had just left downstairs.

From small talk Bill Montague gathered that Blaine was a farmer from Mississippi who was looking for a likely location to settle upon. Jackson was a cattle buyer from Chicago. The rancher's disapproval of the cold, polished Chicagoan was not lessened when he watched Jackson deal.

"Gambler," he thought instantly, as he watched those slender white fingers.

He settled down, tossing a white chip into the pot for luck. Harrison eyed the dealer for an instant, and looked down at the cards falling before him. He had received a tip.

As it drew nearer to midnight Montague was some two or three hundred dollars ahead of the game. Jackson was dealing again. Carelessly he upended the deck, exposing the bottom card. It was the ace of hearts.

Before Montague could call for a cut he had begun to deal. The rancher shrugged. The matter was not important. The betting proceeded, Blaine and Harrison staying for the drew with Jackson. The Chicagoan picked up his hand and raised the betting.

Blaine had evidently filled a flush or a straight and he was betting strongly. Harrison trailed, but finally dropped out on a stiff bet from Blaine. Jackson hesitated, then called the bet.

Blaine laid down a club flush. Jackson smiled pleasantly as he spread his hand and exposed a full house, aces over treys.

"Better luck next time, Mr. Blaine," he sympathized.

MONTAGUE suddenly shot Jackson a hard glance. For one of the aces in the Chicagoan's full was the ace of hearts that had been on the bottom of the deck.

The rancher eyed Blaine for a moment with pity. Then he carelessly lit a cigarette as Blaine gathered up the cards and began to shuffle.

From that moment Montague loosened his playing a trifle. But the stack of chips before him continued to grow.

Gradually the other games closed and a crowd began to collect around the card table. Then came the big hand of the evening.

Jackson riffled the cards, cut them, and offered them to Tilby for another cut. Jackson began dealing with his lightning-like shower of cards and Montague narrowed his eyes.

Slowly the rancher picked up his hand and stared stonily at the ace, king, queen, jack, and ten of spades—and the seven spot of diamonds. He had been dealt a perfect hand with an extra card. This was no accident. Jackson was framing him. The only way such a frame could be worked would be for Montague to attempt to play the hand. The first crooked deal had been exposed purposely.

Montague realized that he must either play and beat the crooks at their own game, or quit cold. Who was to play the hand against Montague? Carter was sitting next to him, an exceptionally good place to watch Montague and grab him. Jackson, as dealer and stranger, would be through. Tilby was the only gambler left to play the hand. And Tilby carried a grudge.

Blaine had been dealt more than openers, for he opened the pot for one hundred dollars.

"Seems like things are about to break," drawled Montague. "I'll just

have to hike the fee about five hundred dollars."

Carter tossed in his hand with a murmured, "Too much for me."

Harrison eyed Montague in perplexity. He shrewdly guessed that it had been Montague's intention to freeze the Mississipian out with his five-hundred-dollar raise. Blaine acted as though he held a pat hand. Therefore he was liable to stay. Harrison shoved out eleven hundred dollars in chips.

"Raise five hundred," he grunted.

Jackson shot the DZX foreman a quick glance. Had some freak hand come out in that stacked deal? After they exposed Montague's sixth card, the next highest hand would take the pot. If Harrison had drawn a freak hand that outranked Tilby's, the DZX crowd would get away with the money after all.

"Do you pass, Tilby?" asked Jackson levelly.

"I call," Tilby said hoarsely.

"I pass," said Jackson lightly.

"Too steep for my little straight," murmured Blaine.

"I'll call, too," said Montague. "Deal, Mr.—Jackson."

"How many cards?" Jackson's eyes glittered at the wordless insinuation.

"These'll do," Montague said gently.

"So'll these," grunted the laconic foreman.

"One card," demanded Tilby.

"Up to you, Bill," said Harrison briefly.

"There is the makings of such a nice fat little pot on the table that I can't resist the temptation of betting a thousand," said the rancher.

"Aw, you go to hell," Harrison said good-naturedly, and threw in his hand.

Carter relaxed. The matter of Harrison's hand was cleared up. The eyes of all turned to Tilby.

"You must have an awfully good hand or an awfully good bluff," Tilby said slowly. "I'm going to raise you a thousand dollars."

There was a tense moment. Poker history was being made.

"This has developed into something big," Montague mused. "I'll just make it worth your while to call me right now. I'll see your raise, Tilby, and I raise you five thousand."

Tilby shot a furtive glance toward Jackson. The Chicago man's face was expressionless. Tilby looked at the frozen smile on Montague's face. He was in an unenviable position.

"Here is your five thousand," he said. "And I'll raise you all I have here in the bank—ten thousand, three hundred dollars."

Montague studied Tilby. He counted his roll. Jackson smiled down at his fingernails.

"Attendant!" the ranchman called. "Bring me an envelope."

The stationery was brought. Calmly Montague picked up his hand, in plain sight of the man at the table, and sealed it in the envelope. Placing the few small chips left over from his last bet upon the square of white he spoke again.

"Bring me a ham sandwich and a small whisky," he said.

NO ONE MOVED, though there was no telling how long it would be before play was resumed. There was no comment, for in a poker game it was a gambler's prerogative to do strange things right in the midst of a big hand.

Montague knew that he did not dare leave the table. The waiting gamblers would have seized him at once and searched him for that damnable sixth card they knew to be on his person.

The waiter placed before him the sandwich and a small tumbler of liquor. Montague began eating casually. He studied the tensely waiting Tilby thoughtfully. Suddenly he seemed to reach a decision.

Carelessly he leaned over Blaine and dropped the unconsumed half of the sandwich into the cuspidor next to Jackson. Tossing the whisky down his throat he set down the glass and counted out ten thousand, three hundred dollars, and picked up the envelope containing his hand.

"You're bluffing, Tilby," he announced quietly. "If you had any more money in the bank, I'd raise. As it is, I call. What have you got?"

Wordlessly Tilby spread out four sixes and a jack.

Montague nodded thoughtfully, "You did have a pretty good hand after all. Nevertheless it doesn't top this one."

He tore open the envelope, drew forth the five cards, spread them on the table, fanwise. It was his royal flush. He started to rake in the pile of wealth.

"Just a minute," came Jackson's hard voice. "There are only forty-one cards here. With Montague's five and your five, Tilby, that makes only fifty-one. There is one card short—and we started with a full deck. The seven of diamonds is missing."

Tilby rose unsteadily to his feet, pointing his finger accusingly at the DZX owner.

"I accuse Bill Montague of cheating," said he. "He's got that missing card on him."

Jack Montague flung himself at the accusing gambler's throat. Tilby snarled, and attempted to draw a weapon.

"Steady, son, steady," came Montague's calm voice. "Upon what do you base your accusation, Albert Tilby?"

"I accuse you of palming cards all evening," said Tilby evenly. "Your luck has been too good. I accuse you of having that missing seven of diamonds in your possession."

"Prove it, you crooks!" cried Harrison angrily, springing to his feet. "And you"—he looked deep into Carter's tricky eyes as he bent close— "if you attempt to place anything in Bill Montague's pocket or on him, you'll wake up for breakfast in hell!"

"Gentlemen," said Jackson smoothly, "if this be true, this man should receive the gun brand. If not, Mr. Tilby owes an apology."

"Search him," snarled Tilby. "You, Blaine. You have been losing money."

BLAINE couldn't believe Montague was guilty of anything. But, as the rancher smiled so good-naturedly, he arose and began to go perfunctorily through the DZX man's pockets.

Others joined in the search and the rancher was quickly turned inside out. Nothing came to light. Montague's boots, hat, underclothing, all his wearing apparel was fruitlessly examined.

Jackson drew back with eyes that glittered. He studied the rancher's face strangely.

Calmly shoving his chips across the table and placing the pile of greenbacks in his pocket, Montague said, "Cash 'em," to the white-lipped Tilby, then touched Blaine on the shoulder.

"Tilby and Carter and Jackson," he said quietly, "are crooked gamblers. They know how I know. Mr. Blaine, did I understand that you are looking for some land? Come on downstairs with us..."

The house gamblers gathered around the table as the last of the patrons made off.

"This is a fine mess," snarled Tilby. "You broke us and nearly cost me my life."

"Shut up," snapped Jackson. "I'm trying to think."

"I can't understand how he did it," said Carter savagely. "Are you sure you dealt him that sixth card, Jackson?"

"The card is missing, isn't it?" returned Jackson.

"Here, here!" soothed Carter, as he leaned over to toss his cigar into the cuspidor. "Don't you two quarrel. I—"

He broke off and stared down into the spittoon. He slowly reached down and gingerly brought up a soiled half of a ham sandwich. In the middle of the sandwich lay the missing seven of diamonds, the ragged edges showing the marks of strong teeth.

"I told you that you hadn't seen him work," canted Tilby bitterly.

"I'll get Bill Montague for that,"

Jackson snarled, "and when I do he'll remember this night."

3

SPRING had merged into early summer and the country surrounding Lebanon lay like a gem of verdure in the heart of the encircling mountains.

The day following that disastrous poker game in the fall, Montague had taken Blaine, the Mississippian, to where a German agriculturist had been experimenting for three years with a fruit farm. The farm had been successful and the peaches, cherries, and plums were entering on a healthy fourth year. But the Teuton realized that he and his fences were unpopular, and had sold out to the Mississippian.

Now, with pickers in the peach orchard, with an early crop all but ready for shipping, Henry Blaine found life good. He began to see the agricultural garden he had dreamed of in his unsuccessful youth.

Before the peach crop ripened Patty had made a complete conquest of the countryside. She learned to throw a lariat, to rope a yearling, to brand, and to laugh with, instead of at, the punchers who made such ardent love.

But the handsome cavalier who had come into her life out of the rain on the first night of her coming to Lebanon signally failed to become one of her conquests. With her—and he was at the Blaine farm frequently, as all the DZX men stopped on their way to or from town—he was only friendly and companionable. He was a college man, an athlete, and a normal young man who was not conceited.

He refused to fall in love with Patty Blaine, though, so she vowed to make him fall in love with her. But, due to some treacherous reaction, she suddenly found herself deeply in love with the man she sought to bring to heel. This shocked her, then made her angry for having fallen into her own trap.

One afternoon in early July the young man sat on the step in the kitchen doorway of the Blaine farmhouse, lazily watching the young woman who bustled about the warm kitchen. He studied her lovely profile as she vigorously sifted flour into a mixing bowl. A wisp of hair trailed across her eyes and she impatiently brushed it back, getting a smudge of flour on one dimpled cheek. The gingham apron she wore was trimmed with red rickrack.

"Here I sit," Jack drawled, "when I should have ridden on to town with Jim. 'Tis funny how woman distracts man's mind, isn't it? May I ask what you are making?"

"This will be a peach cobbler when it is done," she answered, as she added liberal spoonsful of lard for shortening the crust.

She began to knead the flour and shortening together briskly, he lazily watching her slim, capable hands as they flashed in and out of the mixing bowl. He raised his eyes suddenly and caught her looking at him. She smiled easily and dropped her gaze.

"Put plenty of salt in," he suggested.

"What do you know about cooking?" she demanded.

"More than you think I do," he retorted, and added; "You're a pretty girl, Patty—it is no wonder punchers from all the ranches are on the verge of eating your father into bankruptcy. I'll venture that ninety per cent of your peach pickers are truant cowpunchers."

Her heart leaped at his first words, then dropped back to subnormal at his cool, detached manner of speaking.

"You should feed the poor starved dears at home then," she retorted coolly. "I guess I ought to thank you, however. I believe that is the first compliment you ever paid me."

"A lack of compliments from me

has not stunted your growth," he said carelessly.

She tossed her head and her round young arms bore crushingly down on the groaning rolling pin.

JACK LAUGHED and arose with a jingle of spurs. He stepped swiftly across the floor. "You're a dear girl," he said softly. "And I'm an ornery, mean cowboy."

She looked so lovely, her hair a veritable glow, that he wondered why he had never kissed her. He considered this astounding fact.

"You are going to stay for dinner, aren't you?" she murmured. "It will be ready as soon as the cobbler is done."

"There are ten thousand reasons why I should follow Jim on into town, but I can't think of a one of them now," he said. "And I like peach cobbler. Put lots of dumpling dough in the middle of the peaches and make it sweet."

"You are not particular, are you?" she said, cutting the dough into strips and patterns.

"Shall I grease the pan?" he asked.

"I thought you knew how to cook," she said scathingly. "Bring the kettle of peaches over here."

Under her supervision he began pouring the fragrant mass into the cobbler pan, halting so she could place a layer of dumpling in the pan.

"Are you sure there is enough juice in it?" Jack asked anxiously.

She faced him, elbows akimbo, with righteous exasperation.

"Young man, if you could work as well as you advise, you would be a wonder."

She made such a tempting morsel that he suddenly decided he was a fool for never having kissed her; swept on by a sudden urge he proceeded to make amends for the oversight.

He felt her lips quiver as she drew a startled breath, then experienced a thrill as she responded to his kiss. When he drew back they looked for a long time into each other's eyes, wonder, amazement, and finally recognition unfolding before the gaze of each. A hidden power stirred within Jack's slumbering soul and startled him by its intensity.

"Er—I don't care what you put in the cobbler, Patty," he said insanely.

"Neither do I," she said tremulously...

JACK RODE back to the DZX in the late afternoon, still introspectively studying. The dawning miracle of love was a wondrous thing. He had never felt so vitally alive before.

By the time he reached the ranch dusk was coming on and about the corrals twenty-eight ravenous punchers awaited the clamor of Sing Li's supper bell. The signal sounded and there was a rush for the chuckhouse as Jack rode up.

When the scene in the chuckhouse more nearly resembled a supper than a panic, a slim, broad-shouldered, brown-eyed puncher burst out in vociferous argument with the man at his side.

"Yeah, I'll give Mr. Owens twenty dollars for it an' then I'll paint that there rig uh brilliant hue, hitch the best DZX hoss to it, an' proceed to corral all th' dates with th' best lookin' gals 'around Lebanon. I'll—"

"Aintcha coverin' a little too much territory?" drawled a soft voice from the door, and Jack Montague strode toward the vacant chair at the lower end of the table.

"Nope," Frank Henson denied composedly. "I ain't. I'm uh peach specialist."

"Yuh sure ain't," contradicted Jack calmly, slipping into the easy dialect of the punchers. "In th' first place, me an' Mr. Blaine is th' only peach specialists they is. Second, yuh wouldn't be at home *behind* uh hoss. Third, when yuh can buy uh bargain from Owens that'll be the beginnin' uh the millennium."

Frank glared indignantly at his challenger. "Do I understand yuh to be insinuatin' that I can't drive uh hoss?" he demanded. "Furthermore an' notwithstandin', how does yuh

know this ain't uh good buggy? Where's Jim? Whatcha two treacherous characters gone an' done now?"

"So that was the errand yuh wanted Jim to do for yuh," chuckled Jack. "I'm sure I can't enlighten yuh, Mr. Henson, as I ain't been to town today."

"He meant yuh wouldn't know what to do with yore feet without no stirrups, prob'bly, Frank," suggested "Curly" Matthews from across the table.

Frank ignored the shouts of laughter. He eyed the wit steadily. "Not gittin' too personal," he remarked acidly, "but I wouldn't talk about nobody's clumsy feet if I was uh certain curly-headed blond: I noticed that his hands and feet got in the way somethin' awful when he met Patty Blaine last fall."

"Mebbeso," returned Curly heatedly. "But don't forget, Cicero Socrates Cataline Marcus Aurelius, you, who can ordinarily converse on any subject from botany to—to bad whisky, was as dumb as a deaf mute."

The owner of the DZX was forced to smile. He lifted his voice above the uproar.

"You didn't go on to town with Jim then, son?" he inquired.

"No, sir. I stopped at Blaine's."

Frank nodded sagely. "That's where yuh git that stuff about bein' uh peach specialist. Anyhow, Jim's goin' to close the deal for that buggy today. I betcha he drives my rig home tonight."

"Jim ought to be in by now," the rancher murmured. "Perhaps he stopped at Blaine's for supper. When Jim comes—"

He paused and an instant hush fell over the noisy punchers. The faint but distant clatter of flying hoofs came to their ears. Louder thundered the pounding hoofs as the rider drew nearer.

"Must be Jim," said Curly.

"That's a strange horse," vetoed Montague.

"Whoever is it, he's in a sure enough hurry," said Jack. "Let's go to meet him."

They trooped down to the fenced enclosure just as the rider loomed up through the dusk and flung himself from his sweating, heaving mount.

"Where's Montague?" he demanded.

"Here," said the rancher quietly. "What's wrong, Winters?"

"Jim got in uh fracas with Jackson, th' gambler. They're bringin' him home in uh wagon. I rode ahead so's to tell yuh to fix up for him."

"Do you mean—" began the ranchman.

"No," said Winters quickly. "They jes' had uh li'l shootin' scrape an' Jim was plugged in th' shoulder. Doctor Sawyer fixed him up but he'll hafta lay round for uh day or so."

"How did it happen?"

"Waal," hesitated Winters, "I don't jes' know. I heard Jim didn't have his gun with him."

"Where did the trouble take place?" queried Jack.

"In th' barroom of th' *Texas Hotel*," informed Winters.

"Boys," said Jack in a peuliar vibrant voice, "you know who Jackson is—the Chicago gambler who tried to trim Dad and Blaine last fall. He never returned to Chicago. Any of you want to go to town with me?"

"Just a minute, son," came the steady, even voice of his father. "If this is really the first act of a planned revenge, you'd be inviting death to ride into town after Jackson tonight. All of the crooked element will be with him solid. Suppose we wait and hear Jim's story before we do anything."

THE WAGON bearing the wounded man arrived shortly and the foreman was tenderly placed in bed. The deft hands of Sing Li, Chinese cook and housekeeper for the Montague menage, smoothed the pillows and held a glass of whiskey to Jim's lips.

Harrison surveyed the silent and tense group of punchers who crowded into the room. "Now, boys, don't get ugly," he stated. "They ain't no feud; they ain't no cattle war;

they ain't no trouble. They's jes' one gambler gone loco."

"I should have gone out to town with you," choked Jack.

"Now, Jack, corral them feelin's. Lemme tell yuh how it happened. I went to town and proceeded to tend to th' ranch business. Then I takes th' afternoon to run 'round on them foolish errands yuh misfit cowpunchers was too lazy to do yoreselves th' last time yuh was in—among which I looked at that ole rig for yuh, Frank, and I'll tell uh man it's uh rotten outfit. That's how Hosshead Owens accumulated all his money—skinnin' ignorant cowpunchers.

"Well, I steps into th' *Texas Hotel* to take on uh extra drink. I'd left my gun at Wilkerson's Repair Shop to be tightened uh li'l. This here Jackson was at the bar conversin' with that other snake, Carter. They moves kinda close when I orders my throat gargle but I didn't pay 'em much attention. I starts to drink an' Jackson jostles my elbow an' makes me slop th' stuff all over my hand. I looks him over careful an' it appears to me he's already carryin' more'n his share, so I passes it up.

"But the sonuvagun looks me right in th' eye an' makes uh nasty crack about Bill Montague. That riles me an' I flings my glass in his face. He cusses and splutters an' then we both reaches for our guns. Mine ain't there; that's all there are to it."

"Do you mean to say that Jackson shot an unarmed man?" demanded Jack incredulously.

"Now Jack, now Jack," soothed the foreman. "Everybody seen me reach; he didn't know I'd left my gun anywheres."

Jack said with a thin, knife-edged smile, "I guess we'd better be moseyin' along toward town, boys."

He turned to go, the punchers making ready to follow him.

"Wait!" commanded Harrison weakly.

Jack faced the man on the bed.

"Go, if yuh insist, Jack," said the foreman. "But promise me one thing, will yuh?"

"What?"

"Clean up th' whole dang town if yuh want to, but leave Jackson plumb alone. He's mine; I'll settle with him when I get limbered up again."

Jack protested vehemently but the foreman remained firm. Young Montague turned to his father. The elder man's eyes were hard and cold but he slowly shook his head.

"Jim is right, son. It's his privilege to settle with Jackson as he wishes."

Harrison grinned. "Are yuh promisin', Jack?"

"All right," growled the young man reluctantly, "I'll promise, but I bet I'll be sorry I did."

"All you cow nursemaids go on to bed now," commanded Montague. "That includes you, Jack. You've got to ride fences tomorrow, and Jim needs rest."

AFTER THE room had emptied of the restless, dissatisfied men, Montague pulled his chair close to the bed.

"Well?" he demanded.

"It was uh frame-up, Bill," whispered the wounded man. "You know who hangs out at th' *Texas Hotel* as a rule. Jackson has got that gang behind him strong. But th' most surprisin' thing was that Jackson an' Carter wasn't by themselves at th' bar. Owens was with them. An', Bill they'd of got me, if my gun hadn't been missin'."

"*Owens*?" The rancher was distinctly startled.

"Yep. Bill, he's out for us an' when we go to town we better go in uh bunch an' ride herd on 'em."

"I guess the *Texas Hotel* will have to go," said Montague regretfully. "If that lawless element gets a fresh start, they'll set us back fifty years. But how did Owens happen to get mixed up in this business?"

"He ain't the most religious man I ever seen," commented the foreman drily. "But I kinda guess he figured he was too big for me to link him up with that bunch uh shorthorns. When we started to draw, Jackson shot once an' I fell. I think they was takin' my heavenly toga outa th' mothballs when somebody yelled—I think it was that other gambler, Tilby—

'Stop, yuh fools! Can't yuh see he ain't got no gun?' "

The rancher nodded thoughtfully. "I guess I'll ride in and consult with Judge Ryan shortly. You forget it for the present and try to get some sleep, Jim."

4

THE NEXT morning Jack found himself detailed to do the foreman's work, but early the following morning he determinedly saddled his horse and leaped into the saddle.

"Where to, son?" He wheeled his mount to find his father coming toward the corrals.

"Over to Blaine's, Dad," he admitted, flushing a trifle. "The boys have their work all laid out and I'll return before noon."

Montague smiled. "Give Patty *my* regards, too—if you think of it."

Jack grinned and galloped away. He found the young lady ready to ride into Lebanon for household supplies. He swung off of his horse and joyfully encircled her with his arms as she was tightening the cinch of her saddle. Quick as a bird, she darted under her horse's belly.

"Finish tightening it yourself, smarty," she said coolly. "Do you want to ride to town with me?"

"Does a lost calf bawl?" responded the unabashed Jack.

She was anxious to ask him where he had been the day before; why he had not come over to see her. But now that Jack was here she decided to get mad at him because he had made her so miserable; and he hadn't told her that he loved her, either.

"Where is your father going to ship the peaches?" he broke in prosaically.

"He said something about a good price if shipped north by rail. Mr. Owens is attending to that for him."

"Owens?" Jack frowned. "I don't like him."

"I think he is nice," she murmured perversely.

"I have no reason for disliking the man," Jack hastened to say in all fairness. "He is a big business man in Lebanon. I'm glad he is helping your father."

"Oh," exclaimed Patty impatiently, "come on. I'll race you to Hawkins' Draw."

Like a flash he leaped into his saddle and whirled his mount. They sped down the road neck and neck. They rode into Lebanon breathless and laughing, and dismounted before Owens' General Store.

A tall individual of fastidious dress such as many gamblers of the old days affected, appraised them from the corner of his eye and sauntered carelessly toward the *Texas Hotel*. Entering the lobby he strode briskly up to the gambling rooms. Singling out two men who sat talking together he approached them.

"Young Montague just came to town with the Blaine girl," he announced briefly. "They've just entered Owens' store."

An ugly expression crossed the face of the man addressed. The other lowered his tilted chair and leaned across the table.

"Go easy, Jackson," he warned. "No rough stuff with the girl present."

A sneering expression came over Jackson's face.

"We haven't heard a peep out of the DZX outfit, Tilby, since I sent Harrison home on a shutter."

"That is just what worries me," admitted Tilby. "That was pretty rank. You *knew* Harrison's holster was empty."

"How did I know whether or not he had another gun on him? You saw him reach, didn't you?" Jackson faced the other man. "What would you have done, Carter?" he demanded.

The standing gambler smiled thinly. "I believe I'd have shot truer."

"Rot!" snorted Jackson. "He jumped when he discovered his gun was missing; anybody would have missed."

"All right," agreed Carter amiably. "What about this Montague yearling?"

"We'll get him now," decided Jackson tersely.

"You can't go too strong, remember," protested Tilby. "This country is getting civilized a lot faster than you think. You do anything around the girl and Carruthers will have to start something."

"The sheriff won't start anything," sneered Jackson. "He belongs to Owens and you know it."

"But how sure are you Owens will stand for anything this strong?" hesitated Tilby.

"He is with us on this Blaine affair," stated Jackson patiently. "And don't you know there has been an outbreak of rustling north of here? Carruthers will have plenty to do and we won't be noticed. I am going to collect twenty thousand dollars worth of revenge for us. No man ever pulled a stunt on me like Montague did last fall. No one can, and live. If you are too white-livered to sit in on this deal—keep out. And keep your mouth out. Savvy?"

"You forget," Tilby said hoarsely, "that it was I who flirted with death when I accused Bill Montague of being a card cheat. Now, just because I caution you against muddling our plays by your personal hatred, you insult me."

JACKSON studied him. He knew himself to be the better man with a gun. But Tilby had once possessed pride and self-respect; the Chicagoan read in the other the fanatical intention of sacrificing himself if necessary upon the altar of what little manhood remained within him—the altar of courage. It didn't pay to kill a man like that.

He shrugged and smiled. "I spoke too hastily, Tilby. But what I said about Carruthers is true. Will you go with us to Owens' store?"

"Oh, I'll go, all right," agreed Tilby noncommittally.

They found the young couple busily filling their saddle-bags with parcels. Two or three loungers looked suddenly apprehensive at the entrance of the three gamblers and slipped away. Owens was not in evidence, for which Jackson was glad. He might have objected to the trouble taking place in his building.

Carter halted near the door and kept a sharp lookout on the street Tilby leaned carelessly on a counter, while Jackson moved softly over until his shadow fell across the counter before the busy young ranchman.

Montague sensed something wrong, but did not look around.

Jackson, apparently observing the girl for the first time, bowed and smiled. With a sweep of his hand he knocked several of Jack's packages to the floor.

"Trying to take up all the counter," he asked. "Get out of the way and let the lady be waited on."

As young Montague recognized the gambler, a quick flame leaped into his eyes. He took in the loosely hanging right hand with its slightly curved fingers, and the positions of Carter and Tilby. He was cornered.

The realization further angered him, but he did not flare up violently. He observed the white-faced clerk lick his lips and tremble. He glanced behind him to see if Patty had drawn out of the line of fire. She stood, hands clasped, eyeing him strangely.

"Well?" rasped Jackson, fingers twitching closer to the handle of his gun. "Why don't you move? You waiting for the lady to pick up your bundles?"

"Why don't you draw that pistol and hold it in your hand?" suggested Jack softly. "That would be a bit safer way to insult a man."

"That's right, Jackson," drawled Tilby. "Give the kid a fair break."

Jackson laughed sneeringly and folded his arms.

"What's the matter, boy? Afraid of getting the same dose your foreman got?"

Jack, who had been tensing for quick action, relaxed. The mention of Harrison suddenly recalled his solemn promise to Jim. For a long moment he stared into the hard eyes of the gambler. Then, without a word, Jack stooped and picked up the packages.

White to the lips, sick with rage and humiliation, he stuffed them into the saddle-bags, flung the leather sacks over his shoulders, walked out and hung the bags onto the saddles.

With flashing eyes and flaming face, Patty walked furiously out to the horses. She drew back from her companion with a glance of burning scorn as he sought to assist her into the saddle. She swung herself onto her mount, touched the animal smartly, and galloped down the street.

Fighting against his anger at his helplessness, the man spurred after her, neither of them missing the taunting laughter of the gambler.

JACK OVERTOOK her shortly. "Say," he called, "what's the matter?"

"What's the matter with *you*, you—coward?" she almost sobbed.

"Oh!" exclaimed he. "That's the man who shot Jim when he was unarmed."

"I notice that you are not unarmed, though," she rejoined scornfully.

"Jim will be going to town in a few days," said Jack quietly, flushing.

"What has that to do with you? Oh, don't ever speak to me again!" She touched her horse with a spur.

The man spurred after her. When he reached her again he coolly caught the bits of her mount. Bringing both horses to a stop he studied her quizzically.

"Control yourself, young lady," he admonished firmly. "Can't you understand this without me drawing a picture of it? Now when Jim—"

She raised her bridle reins and brought the dangling ends down across his wrist with a hard slap.

"Turn my horse loose!" she demanded furiously. "That is the way a coward generally acts—bullying women!"

A flame began to burn in the man's eyes. His lips drew taut and he glanced back. She had never seen him look like this before. He looked like an unleashed tiger.

He calmly unfastened the saddlebag from the cantle of his saddle and swung it before the girl.

"The remainder of your packages," he said, stiffly polite.

Raising his hat he wheeled his mount and galloped back toward Dallas Corner, leaving a frightened, amazed, and highly indignant young woman in possession of the solitude she craved.

It cut deeply to have Patty think him a coward. But Jack couldn't blame her. Confound that promise to Jim anyway. He gritted his teeth as the echo of Jackson's laugh rang in his ears. Surely there was some way he could be revenged upon the man without breaking his promise. Ah! He could call on the sheriff.

His horse stopped at the hitch-rail before the Mexican Dollar Saloon. Jack smiled.

"I reckon that is as good a suggestion as any, pinto," he said. "I'll run in and take a little shot."

He swung one leg over the horse's back and then stood in one stirrup in surprise. Three men stepped out through the swinging doors. They eyed him in stunned astonishment, then, with a startled oath, the middle man made a swift grab at his holster. Instantly, the two others caught his arms and hurried him back into the saloon.

"Upon second thought," amended Jack, "I guess that is as near a shot as I want this morning. Now what the mischief is Owens doing playing around with Jackson and Carter? Of course he owns the *Mexican Dollar*, but it looks funny."

A hundred yards further on he leaped down before a weather-beaten, one-storied frame building, above the door of which a tin sign proclaimed that this was the sheriff's office until the new municipal courthouse was finished. Sheriff Carruthers was alone when Jack entered.

THE MOST striking feature about Sheriff Carruthers was his beard. He was of that old school of fossils whose beards made the West picturesque, but nevertheless were stained with tobacco juice. In conversing, the sheriff had an irritating habit of fingering his lengthy appendage, twisting it into peculiar knots and geome-

tric symbols. His black eyes stared beadily up at his visitor.

"What are you lookin' for, young feller?" He raised his eyebrows. "What's on yore mind?"

"You!" snapped the young rancher suddenly, crisply. "Why haven't you put the attempted murderer of Jim Harrison behind bars?"

"Murderer? Bars?" rumbled Carruthers, fumbling with his whiskers. "Them's heavy words, young feller."

"I've the foolish idea that I'm heavy enough to back 'em up."

"Foolish?" quizzed the other. "Kee-rect."

"Jackson, the gambler, shot Jim Harrison day before yesterday in cold-bloodedness," pursued young Montague. "Now, why haven't you locked him up?"

"Did yuh see the shootin?" queried Carruthers softly.

"No, but plenty of others did," returned Jack shortly.

"Kee-rect," endorsed the sheriff approvingly. "I've inquired all 'round and found it was jes' uh simple shootin' scrape. They both went fer their guns."

"And Harrison didn't have his gun with him," concluded Jack warmly.

Carruthers shrugged. "Yuh ain't holdin' *me* responsible fer that?"

The ranchman pointed one finger accusingly at the bulky man behind the desk.

"Jackson knew that Harrison was unarmed," he grated.

"Huh?" The sheriff was the personification of pained s u r p r i s e. "Prove it an' yuh won't even hafta swear out uh warrant."

"Do I understand that you will take no action, then?" Jack demanded in a hard voice.

"If yore hearin' is good," rejoined Carruthers indifferently.

Jack rode back to the ranch in a disgruntled mood. He found his father talking to the foreman who was sitting up in bed. The cattleman eyed Jack keenly.

"Spill it, son."

"What's ailin' yuh, Jack?" asked Harrison, studying the young fellow's angry face.

"I went to town with Patty Blaine this morning," announced the young man abruptly. "Jackson and his two henchmen came into Owen's store and tried to start a rumpus. I kept my promise."

"An' came home alive," added Harrison gently.

"I'd rather have died," declared Jack, his eyes flashing. "I had to slink out like a mangy cur."

"It takes a braver man to do that, son," Jim said softly.

"That wasn't the worst," added Jack bitterly.

"What did she say, son?" asked his father.

"She got so mad she almost scorched," admitted Jack ruefully. "She ran away from me and I was so mad I turned around and went back to town. She thinks I'm afraid of the gambler. I saw Jackson, Carter, and Owens coming out of the *Mexican Dollar*. Jackson would have shot me if the other two hadn't grabbed him. I decided to ask the sheriff why he hadn't arrested the gambler."

"What did he say?" asked Harrison curiously.

"He said for me to prove that Jackson knew you were unarmed. What do you know about Owens being with that healthy pair?"

"We feared as much, Jack," admitted his father slowly. "It is now our move. For some reasons Owens, one of the richest men in Lebanon, is protecting the gamblers. Carruthers belongs to him, so there you are. I'll ride over to see Judge Ryan myself tonight—after dark."

5

IT WAS A clear night and the sky was of that blue-gray color which lingers after dusk in early summer, before the stars gradually wink into being. An early moon, delicately veiled in a fleecy lacework of clouds, was slowly climbing toward the zenith.

Bill Montague rode along the road to Lebanon, swaying slightly to the motion of his horse, enjoying the comfortable gait. As he skirted Blaine's fence-lined property a figure on horseback rode out from under the shadow of a great oak tree and stopped. The rancher quietly slipped his holster toward the front. For his observant eye had noted that the rider wore two cartridge belts and carried a heavy rifle.

"That you, Montague?" called the horseman.

"Hello, Blaine," responded the cattleman calmly. "Riding somewhere tonight? I'm riding toward town myself. Going that way?"

Blaine nodded, and swung his horse around. They rode for a few yards in silence, Montague glancing keenly into Blaine's tense face.

"How did the peach crop come out?" he ventured at length, gesturing toward the orchard they were passing.

"Good crop." grunted Blaine shortly.

Montague nodded. "Anything I can do, Blaine?"

"I guess not," the fruit grower said unresentfully. "Business deal. Got to interview a man."

"Not meaning to be too personal, Blaine, but it looks like you were prepared for a pretty stormy interview."

"You're neighborly, Montague. I don't see how you can help, but I'll tell you. It's Owens. I turned my entire peach crop over to him. He was to ship at once. I was to pay him twenty-five cents per bushel for storage and brokerage."

Montague checked an exclamation.

"This afternoon I heard from Owens," continued Blaine in a weary voice. "He said half of my peaches rotted before he could ship them. The balance had to be sold for culls at a dollar a bushel. He attached a bill of lading showing that he had shipped only four cars of peaches. He deducted storage and commission on the entire ten thousand bushels and sent me his check for twenty-five hundred dollars. If I—"

He ceased and drew rein. They listened to a slight commotion in the orchard. There was a faint crash and the unmistakable sound of a vexed man swearing fluently.

"Who's there?" called Blaine.

There was no answer.

"I'll stir you up a bit, whoever you are," grunted the fruit grower and raised his rifle.

As the sharp staccato of the shot barked out in the stillness there was the rapid rustling of leaves in the orchard.

"Hey!" bellowed an irate voice. "It ain't fair to hunt birds with uh rifle. Yuh come mighty near shootin' th' britches offa me."

"How many of you birds are there?" laughed Montague. "No balking now, Curly."

"Jes' me and Frank," called back the peach fancier sheepishly.

There was a startled protest by another voice.

"He's the biggest liar in seven states, Mr. Montague. He's plumb by hisself."

"You two boys come here," commanded the rancher.

He turned back to Blaine.

"You had just received a check from Owens," he prompted. "Go on."

"If I accept it, I am ruined," resumed the agriculturist. "Will hardly pay pickers and boxing expenses. I can't pay the mortgage—can't renew it—can't even live the rest of the year. I think I can make Owens change his mind."

"I don't think you can," disagreed the rancher quietly. "In any event, you can arrange the matter of a loan with me, if it comes to that."

"Thank you, Montague. But that would be just that much more money to pay back."

"I fear you will never get to Owens alive while you are in this frame of mind. Don't you know he will be looking for you? To shoot him won't believe matters. He had you all sewed up before he made this move."

"What do you want me to do? Take it lying down?"

"No! But there is more to it than

just stealing your peaches. Do you remember that poker game last fall?"

"I'm hardly likely to forget it," returned Blaine.

"And Jackson wounded Harrison the other day. Owens was with the gambler when he winged Jim. They are in cahoots and Owens owns the sheriff. Jack was in town this morning and Jackson tried to get him."

"Patty told me about that," said Blaine, wincing.

"Jack had promised Jim not to mix with the gambler," explained Montague, "so he was unable to mix with Jackson, which was fortunate."

"I figured it was something of that nature."

"I am on my way to see Judge Ryan now," said the rancher. "You had better go with me. We want to find out just where we stand legally before we make a move."

THE TWO peach poachers came up to the horsemen.

"Me an' Curly was after some peaches 'cause Jim and Jack didn't bring none," Frank began explaining.

"Where are your horses?" interrupted Montague crisply.

"Cross the road in the clump uh laurels," stated Curly.

"Now listen to me, you two peach rustlers. Get your horses and ride straight to Lebanon. Go in quietly and *don't* stop at any saloons. You probably wouldn't come back—ever. Go straight to the freight depot and rout old Myers out. Find out how many cars of peaches Owens actually shipped last week. He'll tell you four, but you tell him I know better and want the truth. This is deadly serious. Meet me at Judge Ryan's home as soon as you succeed. Sidestep everybody."

The two punchers started for their horses. They departed in a swirl of dust, but rode into Lebanon like gray phantoms in the moonlight.

At the foot of the street they dismounted in the shadow of the freight house. They pounded softly but insistently upon the door of the station agent's little room until the old man got grumblingly out of bed and came to investigate.

"They ain't no train out tonight, if yuh're passengers," he stated wearily. "They ain't no money in th' express box, if yuh're holdup men, an' this ain't no roomin' house fer cowpunchers if yuh're drunk. Good night."

"Wait, Myers, wait," commanded Curly in a hoarse whisper. "We come to see yuh fer Bill Montague."

"Can't we palaver inside?" suggested Frank. "It'd look more hospitable fer one thing."

The now wide-awake agent stood aside and beckoned them in. Carefully closing the door, he faced the two punchers expectantly, his pointed nightcap lending him an elfin appearance as he stood there holding his lantern.

"Yuh say Bill Montague wants me?"

"He wants to know somethin' yuh can tell him," corrected Curly. "How many cars of peaches did Owens ship for Henry Blaine?"

"If I don't fergit, th' bill o' ladin' an' my shippin' record says four cars," Myers replied cautiously.

"Bill Montague wants to know how many cars really was shipped."

The little old man sighed. "I knew somethin' would develop outa this mess. But Owens got me this job."

"Sure, sure," soothed Frank. "Yuh're all right, Myers. Now, tell us how many cars was shipped."

"I ain't at liberty to tell you boys railroad business," stated Myers calmly.

"Th' sonuvagun!" ejaculated Curly. "Don't freeze up none, Myers."

Myers remained silent, staring at the two men with troubled eyes.

"Wouldn't yuh do it fer Bill Montague?" asked Frank reproachfully.

"Is it fer Bill hisself?" queried the uneasy old man.

"Yuh betcha, an' yuh know he's gotta good reason fer wantin' to know."

The station agent looked around cautiously.

"Five cars uh general merchandise was shipped at th' same time," he admitted guardedly.

"What did them cars consist of?" prompted Curly.

"Half-ripe peaches," whispered the old station agent. "An' I ain't seen as purty a lot in some distance."

"I begin to git th' general idea uh Blaine's harness," commented Frank.

But it was only after repeated urgings that Myers consented to dress and go with them to see Montague...

HENRY BLAINE stared at the affidavit which lay on Judge Ryan's table before him. His gaze wandered to the face of the little station agent who had made this paper for him. It came to rest upon the face of the big, red-faced man at the head of the table.

Judge Ryan shook his head pityingly.

"Sure, me dear Blaine, 'tis as plain as th' nose on yer face. Owens is wan divil of a scoundrel, but 'tis wan divil of a job an' it costs money to convict him."

"Then why not let me go after him, if the law can't touch him?" demanded Blaine hoarsely.

"Because it is murder for you to run into him now," said Montague crisply; "he is expecting you."

"What do you expect me to do? This ruins me."

"Take that paper home and lock it up," directed the rancher. "If you need money, you can get it from me. Don't cash that check, either. Wait a few days, a few weeks, if necessary, and Owens will tip his hand and we will be able to handle him."

"That's the best ye can do," endorsed Ryan. "We'll trip th' dirty rascal yit. Wait. That fools 'em all if ye've got th' patience."

Blaine stared stonily before him, then slowly bowed his head to the inevitable...

* * *

As the days sped by, though, and nothing was heard from Owens, it began to appear as though Montague had been mistaken. Late summer was coming on, and a dust hung over the range where the cattle moved. And still Owens did not come.

There was an increase in the shootings and sporadic outbreaks in Lebanon, but the range country lay comparatively quiet. The greatest cause for uneasiness was the bank robberies in the surrounding little towns.

Owens' villainy was not known, as Blaine had quietly accepted a loan from the DZX rancher and had paid his pickers. Jim Harrison made one special trip to the Blaine farm to see Patty. He told her things about the ethics of cowland, and particularly of a gentleman's promise and how sacred it was considered.

When he concluded Patty proceeded to say several things distinctly, among which was her opinion of a man who would tie another man up to a promise of that sort, and that any man who tamely submitted to such an arrangement was a timorous character of unbalanced mentality.

And Owens had not moved yet.

But the realtor had been but biding his time. Upon the day that Blaine's patience was holding by a mere thread, Owens inquired confidentially at the Lebanon National Bank for the fruit grower's balance. His answer, given him by an unscrupulous assistant bank cashier, stirred him into action. He rode out to visit the farmer.

"Horsehead" Owens, so called because of his long, sardonic cast of countenance, was a reticent being. He clipped his phrases he clipped his words. The man was well-set-up for a person of forty years, but he gave the appearance of a slow, uncouth hill-billy with his dusty, rumpled trousers shoved into the tops of his worn old boots. He was clean-shaven, seamed of face, grizzled of hair. His eyes were hard, a flintlike color, his lips tight and firm, his shoulders and arms as powerful as a young bear's. In his youth he had been known as a victorious rough-and-tumble fighter.

He had gone steadily forward, grasping, acquiring, accumulating. Anything that stood in the path of his desire, he ruthlessly removed. Although many of his deeds bordered on criminality he had managed to stay within the law.

BLAINE WAS sitting under a shed before a grindstone when the realtor rode into the farmyard. He did not move and Owens rode up, looking down upon the farmer.

"Howdy," he grunted amiably.

"Good morning, Mr. Owens," rejoined Blaine.

"Thought I'd ride out—inquire 'bout crops. Any cotton?"

"You know I did nothing this year except raise peaches. I didn't have the time or the money to do anything else."

"Need money?" inquired Owens.

"Yes," rejoined Blaine shortly, "I do."

"Mebbe can arrange second mortgage, as I hold first. What say?"

Blaine arose and brushed his hands.

"The interest on yore first mortgage falls due on the first of the month," reminded Owens. "Think I can fix things up."

"Come up to the house," said Blaine grimly.

Seated in the big room at the front of the house, Blaine faced his creditor. In the drawer under his hand was the check of the realtor's and the affidavit of the station agent.

"Too bad about yore peaches," Owens clipped. "Market bad this year. Shippin' rotten. Better luck next season. Now—"

"There was nothing wrong with my peaches, Owens," disagreed Blaine abruptly. "You simply stole them from me."

The realtor's eyes settled steadily upon the angry farmer. Had he misjudged this man?

"Terrible statement to holder of your mortgage, Blaine," he said. "Want to amend same?"

"No!" roared Blaine, jerking open the drawer beneath his hand. "I can prove it."

"You are a liar, Blaine," stated the other calmly. "Keep hands out of drawer. Have you covered."

Blaine, who had meant to reach for the paper, paused in surprise. "You draw a gun on me—in my own house?"

"You need money," rejoined Owens. "Natural for you to turn to last man dealt with to pry money from. Feared this. Came to help you."

"Doubtless," snarled Blaine.

"Did," continued Owens smoothly. "Will cancel first mortgage completely and lend you five thousand. On certain conditions."

"What are you driving at?" Blaine demanded.

Both men had been so intent that they failed to hear or see the horseman who rode slowly up to the house. Jack Montague had come to make his peace with Patty Blaine.

"Bachelor—single man," explained Owens. "Like your daughter. On day she marries me will cancel mortgage and lend you five thousand."

Blaine's jaw sagged in surprise as he eyed the man before him. That Owens, old enough to be Patty's father, should show such a bent, staggered the fruit grower.

"Do I understand you to be offering me financial relief in exchange for my daughter's hand?" he managed queerly.

"Right," endorsed Owens.

"Suppose she objects?" queried Blaine, choking oddly, and gently easing his feet out from under the table.

"That's how you earn cancellation of mortgage—handling girl. What's answer?"

"I told you I had proof to show you are a crook," said Blaine tersely. "I need no proof to prove you are a scoundrel and a vulture as well. My answer is no, you damn rascal!"

He finished with a shot, springing to his feet and turning toward the old-fashioned mantel above which hung his rifle.

Owens raised his hand from his lap, a six-shooter in his grasp. A girl's scream came from the doorway.

"Both of you stop where you are," broke in a hard, metallic voice from the hallway. "Stand still, Blaine; put down that gun, Owens."

But the fruit grower was too blinded with rage. He didn't stop to think that he could not reach his gun before the realtor shot him. He only knew that he must shove the muzzle of his rifle into that ugly face and pump until the gun was empty!

6

A GUN was not sufficient to control this situation, Jack Montague realized, and leaped upon the broad back of the real estate man, clutching the revolver arm at the wrist in a grip of iron. Owens staggered against the table, overturning a vase of roses Patty had brought in from the flower garden. He strove with all his great strength to release his imprisoned hand.

Anxious to disarm the man before Blaine could shoot, Jack recklessly released Owens and jerked at the gun with both fists. The weapon discharged twice, powder burns searing Jack's cheek. But he succeeded in freeing the gun and tossed it into the fireplace just as the enraged realtor dealt him a terrible blow in the chest.

He staggered back, and the room swam before him. The realtor swayed grotesquely over him and a hairy paw clutched at his throat. At that touch his brain cleared with a snap. Without attempting to free his throat he swung a vicious blow at the elbow joint of Owens' arm, and the realtor's arm collapsed under the numbing pain.

Jack lifted his opponent bodily and whirled quickly, bringing his own back toward the fireplace just as Blaine was raising the rifle.

"Stop, you fools!" Jack called out hoarsely, now that he stood between the two enemies.

Owens dropped his numbed arm and Jack half-turned to the farmer. The realtor shifted and swung with all his power at the lean young jaw before him. The fact that young Montague was turning probably saved him from a broken jaw. As it was, the glancing blow snapped his head back and parted the skin along his cheek like paper.

He dropped to his knees, shaking his head dazedly, almost stupidly watching the blood drip to the carpet. Blaine uttered an oath and Jack looked up to see the fruit grower again raising his weapon. He saw Patty's white face against the darkness of the doorway. He saw Owens diving for his gun. Then something snapped in his brain.

This brute who had robbed Patty's father now sought to lay his filthy hands upon the girl—Jack's girl. He had tried to bargain for her like a slave trader in the Orient. The colossal temerity crystallized into a burning hatred and a lust to kill in Jack.

He jerked the six-shooter from his holster and tossed it in the general direction of Blaine.

"Get it," he commanded as he caught Owens by the hair with his other hand.

He twisted Owens' head around, struck the man full between the eyes even as the clawing hand grabbed for him. The realtor groaned and a knot puffed up quickly, half-closing his eyes. His clutching paws ripped the shirt off Jack, one nail clawing a vivid gash over the heart.

But Jack didn't feel the gash, was oblivious to the clawing fingers. By a herculean effort he staggered to his feet, lifting the two-hundred-pound realtor with him, rocking the man cruelly with a blow to the side of the jaw.

Owens was snarling now. He doubled his fists and for a brief moment they stood slugging each other. Owens was the first to wince under the torture, and he clenched the wiry form before him in a bearlike hug.

Down they went, rolling over the floor, the young rancher slugging away in a cold fury. The realtor could not hold the bundle of steel that writhed in his arms.

He broke away and scrambled to his feet. Jack was up before him and met him with another blow between the eyes. Owens bored in blindly, arms swinging like flails.

The flaming-eyed young rancher gaged his distance and stepped forward with a blow to Owens' chin

that carried all of his strength and weight behind it. The smack was like a pistol shot and the realtor halted in mid-stride, turned a quick flip backward, and his head hit the floor.

Jack's arm flopped uselessly at his side. He had broken one of the bones in his wrist. But he threw back his head and laughed exultantly.

PATTY RAN to the wild-eyed young man's side, beating against his naked chest with her clenched hands.

"Stop that horrible sound, Jack Montague!" she cried firmly. "Do you hear me? Stop!"

The fire in his gaze frightened her. She shrank back. Then he pulled her against him encircled her with a muscular arm. Almost savagely he bruised her lips with his kiss.

Some hidden fire burst into flame and she thrilled to his kiss; for a long moment they stood in close embrace.

Gradually the turmoil in Jack's heart quieted. His face assumed its normal aspect except for a shining glint to the eyes.

"Girl," he cried, "I love you! I love you, do you hear? You are mind; I've put my brand on you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," She nodded. "You are mine, too. Do *you* understand? And you've got to stay out of trouble with that Jackson. He might kill you."

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered the fruit grower. "Isn't that a woman for you?"

The man on the floor groaned. Jack staggered wearily over to the realtor's side.

"Water," he commanded.

Patty flew to the kitchen and returned with a bucket of cold water which Jack took from her and dashed it, dipper by dipper, into the unconscious man's face.

"Whisky," he called as Owens' eyelids fluttered.

Blaine complied. Prying the realtor's clenched teeth apart, the resuscitator poured a stiff jolt of the fiery liquid down the man's throat.

Owens' heels drew up violently. He rolled over and groaned.

"The affidavit and his own check," commanded Jack. "I'll have him sitting up in a minute."

When Owens struggled his painful way back to consciousness, he found himself propped in a chair at the table, his wallet between his fingers. He stared at his blood-stained fingers. Then memory came flooding back and he looked quickly up—into the black mouth of a .45 backed up by a smeared, grinning face with twin devils for eyes; young Montague's face.

"You came prepared to talk money," stated the rancher, slowly and distinctly. "That saves us the trouble of bothering with checks. Direct your befuddled gaze to the crisp, legal document before you. It is an affidavit to the effect that you shipped nine carloads of extra fine peaches in place of four loads of culls."

Owens' eyes flickered toward the ceiling.

"All right, don't read it. Open your wallet and count out twelve thousand, five hundred dollars in cash. Mr. Blaine will return your twenty-five-hundred-dollar check and fake bill of lading. This will still allow you more than you deserve as a commission. Get busy."

Owens merely brought his eyes to bear on the speaker.

"This is blackmail—robbery," he finally mumbled thickly.

"Read the affidavit," advised Jack.

The realtor did so. Then he wordlessly opened his wallet and counted out the amount demanded. Hardly able to see, he started to gather up the papers.

"Leave the affidavit," drawled the hateful voice.

"This is a holdup," forced out Owens. "I'll have a warrant out for you in an hour. Will not forget this."

"You'd better not," declared Jack cheerfully. "And you will have no warrant out for any one of us—ever. You make one more crooked move

like this and you will be through in Lebanon. And speaking of hold-ups, you'd better have Carruthers spend a little more time on this gang of ruffians who are doing a little rustling and a lot of bank robbing if he wants to hold his job."

Owens swayed to his feet, his face an inscrutable mask. He didn't glance at the fruit grower who was calmly counting the pile of greenbacks on the table. One burning glance he bestowed upon the girl, then stumbled to the door...

THAT JACK MONTAGUE'S warning seemed to have its effect upon the Owens administration was noticeable in the fact that the Blaines were unmolested and a series of placards were tacked upon fences, barns, and signposts.

REWARD

$1,000 reward for the capture of the desperado who calls himself Nightbird or for information leading to his apprehension.
Signed:
CARRUTHERS, SHERIFF,
NEW COURTHOUSE

Two citizens of Lebanon turned from their perusal of one poster tacked on the side of a building and walked toward the freight depot.

It was early morning and the damp mistiness of a heavy fog hung in the autumnal atmosphere, a vast cloud over the sleeping Mecca of hard-drinking men. The two men stepped upon the platform of the depot and impatiently tried the door of the room the railway company had fitted up for their local representative.

"C'mon, Myers!" shouted one. "Open th' freight house. It's after seven o'clock. 'Smatter with yuh?"

"I never knowed the old man to be so late," suggested the other. "Mebbe he's gone over to th' *Greasy Spoon* for chow, Hal."

"Mebbe. I got to git some stuff uh the old woman's orderin' an' that's th' very time he don't open up prompt. Hi! Myers!" He stepped to the window and shaded his eyes as he stared into the room. "My Gawd, Hal!"

The man called Hal jumped to the window, stared into the gloom.

Myers lay stretched out on the floor on his back, in his nightshirt, a surprised expression upon his querulous old face. His arms were outflung and a darkening little puddle heavily outlined one side of his torso. The heavy iron safe was open and the money drawers were hanging half out, empty.

The two men smashed the window pane and unlocked the sash. They clambered quickly into the room and knelt over the pathetic little figure.

"Deader'n a doornail," stated Hal. "Pore ole Myers."

"They sure looted the express company's safe," commented the other. "One of us is gotta stay here an' th' other better git th' sheriff an' th' constable."

"I'll go, Zeke," exclaimed Hal quickly. "Don't let nobody in 'til we git back."

Hal sprang to the door. It was locked and the key was missing. He faced his companion and their eyes met.

"It musta been somebody Myers knowed. Anyway, they got him to let 'em in. Winder locked on th' inside—door locked from th' outside an' th' key missin'."

ZEKE NODDED, and Hal ran to the window. Vaulting through, he nearly lit upon a skulking figure. Hal clutched at it with both hands and fell heavily with the stranger to the platform. Zeke ran to the aperture and leaped out.

"Who in hell are yuh?" grunted Hal to his captive.

"The underdog at present," wheezed the prisoner. "Get up, brother, and let's take stock."

The stranger proved to be a fairly young man, dark of hair and eyes, of pleasing and alert countenance, but dirty, ragged and begrimed from "riding the rods."

"Where'd yuh come from?" growled Zeke.

"I was kicked off a freight train last night," explained the captive

pleasantly. "My name is McQuirey, unmarried, age twenty-nine, height five feet nine inches, weigth one hundred and six-two pounds. I'm broke, out of a job and hungry. What did you say is your name?"

"Humph!" snorted Hal. "How d'yuh happen to be hangin' round here?"

"I have just answered that question," replied McQuirey easily.

"Yuh was peerin' in th' winder an' yuh wasn't makin' no noise," accused Zeke. "Can yuh explain that?"

"This isn't fair," objected McQuirey. "Why not answer a few things for me? Who is the dead man in there?"

"Howdcha know he's dead?" demanded Hal quickly.

The tramp made a gesture of impatience. "I heard one of you say so. Also, his name is Myers and the express company's safe has been robbed. Further than this, one of you answers to the name of Zeke. Now, can you do a little talking without sticking question marks at the end of everything you say? Just who was Myers? The express agent?"

"He was," flung Zeke, grudgingly. "An' th' station agent, too...Hal, hunt up th' sherrif. I'll entertain our visitor 'til yuh come back."

As Hal started toward Main Street on a run, Zeke produced a six-shooter and poked it into McQuirey's ribs.

"Climb in th' room right keerful," he commanded. "My trigger finger shore is itchy."

The tramp smiled. "You are one of the most persuasive men I ever met; I can't refuse you."

He climbed into the room and stood quietly. But his eyes took in every details of the littered quarters.

Hal returned with Sheriff Carruthers. The two men clambered in through the window and the pilose individual glared about fiercely.

"Did yuh touch anything?" he asked Zeke.

"Nope. Hal went fer yuh right away."

"Kee-rect," approved the sheriff, stroking his beard with a military snap and precision. "Who's this?"

"Sez his name is McQuirey. We caught him lookin' in th' winder."

"Where'd yuh come from, young feller?" the sheriff asked.

"Nowhere in particular," McQuirey said respectfully. "I was traveling for my health and I missed connections with my train here last night."

"What time last night?" snapped Carruthers.

The tramp's eyes narrowed at the tone.

"It was that freight train," he drawled. "I don't know the exact time as I had given my watch to the engineer. He needed it; he wasn't more than a week behind time."

"H u u u m m m m," mumbled the sheriff, giving the begrimed figure a searching look. "'Bout ten o'clock, I reckon. Search him, Zeke."

THE TRAVELER proved to be the possessor of two safety pins, one black button which belonged where a pin was working, a few matches, a soiled bandanna, and a sack of smoking tobacco

"Be careful of my tobacco case, please," cautioned McQuirey anxiously. "I have no more of my specially prepared blend. By the way, I wouldn't mind having a smoke. Have one of you gentlemen a cigarette paper? I used my very last one to clean my diamond stud."

"Don't git so funny," advised Hal grimly. "This here's murder an' it looks bad fer yuh."

"How can I be implicated?" rejoined the tramp. "I have no weapon and if I knew anything about this matter, do you think I'd be hanging around?"

"Kee-rect," agreed the frowning sheriff. "He ain't got no knife on him an' his pockets don't show no sag or wear that uh knife 'ud make."

"Knife?" asked Zeke and Hal together.

"Yep, knife. Myers was stabbed to death."

"How do you know?" demanded

McQuirey keenly. "You haven't looked the body over."

A peculiar gleam came into the sheriff's eyes. He twisted his beard into a veritable Gordion knot before he replied:

"Yuh don't see no bullet holes, do yuh? Turn him over, Hal. I betcha they's uh knife wound in his back. See there—that slit in his nightshirt under his left shoulder blade? What did I tell yuh?"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Hal.

"You win, Sheriff," agreed McQuirey admiringly. "I have no doubt you have already deduced that it was a complete surprise attack."

"Kee-rect," agreed Carruthers promptly, polishing his whiskers briskly.

"Further than that," went on McQuirey, "I'll venture to say that you have already surmised that the murderer was someone Myers knew pretty well—because the safe has been opened by one who knew the combination. Evidently Myers opened it himself, and received a knife thrust in the back for his pains. Somebody deceived the poor old man. How? By having a dummy package in the safe. He came to the old man in the night, with his receipt for his package, told how urgent it was for him to get it, and prevailed on the old man to open the safe. The thing to do is to make a list of all packages received the past ten days and trace them down. Isn't that just what you've mapped out as a basis to work from, Sheriff?"

"Kee-kee-rect," stammered Carruthers, almost missing his customary beard stroke. This fellow seemed awfully smart for a hobo. "Yuh're purty quick at followin' my idees, young feller. I reckon I'll be holdin' yuh for further investigation. You boys stay here an' don't let nobody in 'til I git back. C'mon, young feller. We better mosey over to th' jail fer uh spell."

"I'll be damned," ejaculated McQuirey. "Well, it won't be the first time we've been in jail, eh, Lord Hairy?"

"Brrrr—grrrrff," rejoined Carruthers angrily.

7

COURT WAS in session in the newly completed county building and Judge Ryan was on the bench. Judge Michael Ryan, a product of the "auld sod," had been transplanted at a tender age and had taken root in the fertile valleys and sagebrush-covered plains of the western United States.

The judge was a massive man, with a thatch of fiery hair in which silver was beginning to show. His knowledge of law did not stem from Blackstone. It was crude but effective. He had a fair grounding in legality and a sense of humor. He tempered law with justice, which was fortunate for culprits, as he was the supreme legal authority in Lebanon.

This morning he was in a touchy mood. "Next case," he called irascibly.

"Owens *Bright Star* accused of sellin' whisky on Sunday," droned the melancholy-faced clerk.

"Horsehead Owens," snapped the judge, "ye're charged wid sellin' booze on th' Sabbath. I've warned ye onct before. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor," clipped the realtor.

"Court's adjourned," interrupted Judge Ryan. "Horsehead, ye're a domn liar. I've bought it from ye myself. Court's in session. Mr. Owens th' court finds ye guilty. Fine, fifty dollars. Pay th' clerk an' shut up. Next case."

"John Doe," read the clerk. "Charged with the three D's."

"John Doe," rapped the judge, "if I'm not mistaken ye was here last week under an alias. 'Twas Harry Taylor, I believe. Ye're charged wid th' same offense, too—dirty, drunk an' disorderly. What have ye to say?"

"Not guilty, Yore Honor," quavered the drunkard.

"Fine, ten dollars," said the judge. "An' next week it'll be ten days in th' jug. Next."

"Tim Kelly," droned the clerk. "Charged with wife beatin' an' disturbin' th' peace."

Ryan looked down at a wizened, undersized man who stared back belligerently out of a pair of beautifully blackened eyes.

"Tim," the judge said reprovingly, "ye're charged wid beatin' up that poor little two-hundred-pound wife o' yers. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Oi guiss Oi'm goilty,Yer Honor," responded the culprit. "Sure an' Oi knocked th' breath from th' auld gal afore she laid me out this toime."

"Ye're improvin', Tim," the judge chuckled. "Here's a dollar. Go out an' take a big wan on me. Next."

Suddenly there was a commotion at the door.

"What th' hill's broke loose now," complained His Honor. "Here comes th' sheriff wid a prisoner. What's wrong, Sheriff?"

"Lots," stated Carruthers. "Myers has been killed an th' safe robbed. This here feller was hangin' around an' he was purty slick with his tongue so I brung him in fer investigation."

"Myers killed?" exclaimed the judge. "Go on an' talk, Carruthers. I'm listenin'."

Ryan studied the prisoner attentively while the sheriff gave his hastily acquired evidence.

"An' what have ye to offer, young man?" the judge asked gravely.

"Nothing of interest," said McQuirey. "I am not guilty, Your Honor."

"That's all I've been hearin' all mornin'. However, it looks black enough for ye at present. We'll be havin' to lock ye up until there is further developments. What's yer name again?"

"McQuirey, sir. Joseph McQuirey, a homeless cowboy who needs a job."

"McQuirey, eh? Another wan o' them rench names. Well, I like yer looks, McQuirey. Run along, Sheriff, an' continue yer investigation. Send Pink Sills in to guard th' prisoner. Next."

THE DOCKET was cleared when the sheriff returned. Carruthers dramatically place a parcel upon the table and unwrapped it. A blood-stained handkerchief was exposed to view. Slowly he unfolded it. An open knife, stained with blood, of long and keen blade known as a "crabapple switch" lay before them. Cut in the stag handle were the initials "J.M."

"I found this in one uh th' empty drawers in th' safe," stated the sheriff. "Th' murderer must of left it in his hurry. Now who round Lebanon knows Myers well enough to git in an' carried uh knife like this?"

"Have ye any idea yerself?" demanded Ryan bluntly.

The sheriff's reply was prevented by the opening of the door. A man with pale blue eyes entered. A deputy's star was pinned to his suspenders.

"Mornin', Judge—mornin', Sheriff," he murmured. "I jes' got in from lookin' over th' bank at Weston. Nightbird agin. What's all this 'bout murderin' th' station agent?"

"Kee-rect." The sheriff nodded. "I left word for yuh to take charge at th' depot as soon as yuh come in. Lemme tell yuh 'bout it, Higgs, then yuh run along."

Rapidly the sheriff brought his story up to the discovery of the knife. Suddenly a flash of recollection entered Higgs' eyes and he emitted a soft whistle.

"By gosh, I seen that very knife in Jack Montague's possession last week," he stated.

"J.M.—Jack Montague," said the sheriff. "An' I seen the same knife in th' possession of th' same party in my office not three months ago."

"That's plumb ridiculous," snorted the judge. "Don't be makin' an ass o' yerself, Carruthers.

The sheriff shook his head stubbornly. "This here is young Montague's knife. I gotta do my duty, Jedge."

Judge Ryan cocked his head like an inquisitive bull. "Ye better be

watchin' yer tracks, me b'y. Old man Montague ain't wan to be trifled wid. An' young Jack is kinda uh complete box o' tricks himself. If ye want somethin' easy, go out an' find this here raidin' Nightbird."

"I guess this acquits me," suggested McQuirey gently. "Do you mind if I withdraw?"

"I guess yuh can go," said Carruthers grudgingly.

"Hill's bills!" the judge roared. "Acquits ye? Wid yer name Joe McQuirey—wid yer initials J.M.—wid ye hangin' round th' station? I reckon not, me laddie buck. What's th' matter wid ye, Carruthers?"

"Kee-rect, kee-rect," said the sheriff.

"Judge Ryan," wailed McQuirey, "you are not going to let Santa Claus lock me up in the cold, damp and unsympathetic jail, are you? Surely this is not justice."

Judge Ryan eyed the suspect queerly. The man, in all probability, was innocent. But McQuirey's was an unenviable position.

"Well," stated His Honor, "due to lack of sufficient damning evidence an' incriminatin' witnesses I fix th' bond o' Joseph McQuirey at—ten thousand dollars. Sure an' that's as fair as I can be, me b'y."

"I suppose you are right," murmured McQuirey wearily...

THE AFTERNOON shadows were lengthening when a gaunt, tanned stranger carrying a battered, sawed-off, but highly effective-looking shotgun under his arm rode up to the courthouse and sought the sheriff's office.

Carruthers was out, but Deputy Sheriff Higgs looked condescendingly upon the raw-boned visitor.

"Howdy," said the stranger pleasantly. "Are you th' sheriff?"

"Deputy. Won't I do?"

"Yuh will," jerked the stranger. "Yuh've a prisoner—McQuirey by name—suspected uh murder?"

"We has," admitted the deputy.

"His bond is set at ten thousand dollars?" pursued the stranger calmly.

"She is," informed Higgs, yawning boredly.

"Waal, I've come to put up th' money," stated the stranger casually and drew a great roll of bills from his pocket.

Deputy Higgs' yawn ended so abruptly he bit his tongue. The lean hands began to count out fifty-dollar bills onto the table.

"Wait uh minute—wait uh *minute*," gasped the staggered deputy.

"What's th' matter?" asked the surprised stranger. "These here bills is good. I puts up the bond an you turn McQuirey loose—right now."

"Hold on while I gits the jedge," wailed Higgs.

He bolted for the door and the stranger sat down, his gun across his lap, leaving the greenbacks upon the table.

Judge Ryan proved to be as surprised as the deputy, but he arranged matters satisfactorily.

"Yer name an' address, please?" he demanded as he prepared to give receipt for the bond.

"Jed Martin. Jes' put down general delivery at Lebanon. I jes' come from beyond th' Canadian th' other day. I ain't got no permanent address yit. Though I'm figurin' on stayin' quite uh spell."

Judge Ryan wrote steadily. "I see. Now, there has been no date set for this murder case, so ye better keep in touch wid me, Martin, an' so had McQuirey. Ye a relation o' th' accused?"

"No relation," returned Martin non-committally. "I can depend on yuh turnin' McQuirey loose right now, can I?"

"Ye can take him wid ye," replied the disgruntled judge. "Higgs, bring in McQuirey."

"I'll be goin' now," rejoined the bondsman. "Evenin'."

"But—but don't ye want to see yer friend again?"

"'Tain't necessary. Evenin'."

Wordlessly the judge watched the lanky Martin stride away.

When the vagabond stood before him, he studied the still begrimed figure and squinted one speculative eye at the tramp.

"Sure an' ye are wan divil of a fast worker," he grunted. "How did ye talk that lanky mountaineer out of sufficient money to bond ye in cash? An' I was wonderin' where yer friend Martin raised th' coin to bond ye."

"I have no friend by the name of Martin," was the surprising answer.

"D'ye mean to be sayin' ye don't know who bonded ye?" thundered the judge.

"I haven't seen a soul but the jailer since you detained me this morning. I don't know a single person in Lebanon—or a married one, either. I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about, although I gather that I have been bonded."

The judge was beyond coherent speech. He could only point to the pile of greenbacks.

"Fine," said McQuirey briskly. "I always knew I was worth ten thousand dollars but I never knew another person who agreed with me. I take it that I am now free? Good afternoon. Give my regards to Santa Claus."

"Now what th' hill d'ye know about that?" choked Judge Ryan. "A man puts up ten thousand dollars for a tramp. He rides away without seein' th' man he's bondin'. An' the prisoner denies all acquaintance wid his bondsman an' takes it as calmly as a two-finger drink."

Sheriff Carruthers came in and caught sight of the currency on the table.

"My gosh!" he gasped. "Who done robbed who, now?"

Higgs acquainted him with the details while Ryan mused:

"Jed Martin—Canadian River—ten thousand dollars—Jed Martin—J.M.—Bejabbers!" He shouted aloud so suddenly that the sheriff and his deputy jumped.

"Listen onct," commanded the legal authority earnestly. "This matter is gettin' more serious than ye b'ys realize. Carruthers, why should a stranger bond a stranger widout a good reason? An' consider this bondsman's name. Jed Martin. There's J.M. again. What d'ye make that?"

"Yuh oughta grabbed him," growled Carruthers.

"Grabbed him?" snorted the judge. "Just because his initials are J.M.? Ye talk like an ass, Carruthers."

The sheriff clawed at his beard. He felt the need of advice, of superior advice—of immediate advice.

8

THE AROMA of strong coffee and crisp bacon surrounded the DZX chuckhouse and Sing Li set up a hideous clamor on the evening air with his battered old cow-bell. The dusty stranger grinned and continued on to the bunkhouse.

Peering in, he saw two punchers drawing on new and fancy boots. One was a blond, a curly-haired fellow with a wide, smiling mouth. The other was brown-haired, with laughing eyes. Other than these two the long room was empty.

"Howdy." The stranger grinned.

"Hullo," responded both punchers promptly.

"Yuh're jes' in time for chow," continued the curly-haired one. "Wash up out there at th' bench. Dang these here tight boots, anyhow," he grunted. "Frank, I jes' know these here shoes is yore'n. You got mine."

"Hurry, stranger," added Frank. "They's twenty-seven hungry hyenas runnin' towards that bell right now from all directions. We gotta move 'cause they won't be nothin' left."

The dusty stranger smiled pleasantly and turned to wash his face and hands.

"You boys going sparking this evening? Those boots would so indicate."

"Nope," replied Curly. "We're jes' goin' to town."

The stranger's eyebrows raised behind the towel. "Do you need any horse and cow artists around here?"

"We got several specialists," said

Frank seriously, "but they might be room fer one more."

"Who owns this ranch?"

"Bill Montague," stated both punchers, eyeing in surprise the man who dared ask such an obvious question.

"Is he a hard man to work for? Does his help all like him?"

"Most of th' work is under the eyes uh his son, Jack, an' th' foreman, Jim Harrison."

"Well, are they easy to work for?"

"Stranger," said Curly earnestly, "if yuh find one single lonesome party on these here holdin's from the cook on up who wouldn't go off an' die fer th' Montagues, we'll—poison him."

At the supper table the newcomer introduced himself.

"Boys," he said, "my name is Joe McQuirey. I can saddle a horse and throw a steer. I have seen worse shots. I want a job; how about it?"

"Yuh got any duffle?" inquired Jim Harrison appraisingly. "Where's yore hoss?"

"Brother, you see me in my all in alls. I've a pretty strong hunch that I'll be starting at the bottom of the ladder. Do you require any demonstrations? I can wrestle a few cows for you."

"Nope. Guess not. I'm Harrison. We're ridin' a purty complete bunch uh punchers but—" He glanced toward the head of the table.

"McQuirey?" said Jack Montague pleasantly. "Are you the man who was detained for the murder of the station agent yesterday?"

"The same. And you are Jack Montague?"

"I am."

The two men eyed each other frankly, their gazes meeting squarely.

"I like your looks, McQuirey," said young Montague. "You look capable."

"You don't look real soft, yourself," returned McQuirey.

"I guess we can take on one more puncher," said Harrison.

AFTER the meal was over McQuirey strolled up to the ranchhouse with Jack.

"Did you lose a knife recently, Mr. Montague?" he asked.

"Yes," responded young Montague queerly. I've missed it ever since I was in town a couple of weeks ago."

"What sort of a knife was it?"

Jack produced a knife from his pocket. "Just exactly like this one," he said promptly.

McQuirey gazed curiously at the knife, an exact counterpart of the blood-stained knife the sheriff had laid on the judge's table the day before, even to the initials on the handle.

"How does it happen that you have two knives of this same pattern? he demanded.

"I bought three of them at one time from a cutlery house in St. Louis," explained Jack easily.

"Does anyone know this?"

"No—not that I know of," responded the puzzled Montague.

"Forget it yourself, then," admonished McQuirey, "Because your missing knife is being held as the instrument with which death was inflicted upon Myers, and I have no doubt that it was used."

"I hadn't heard a word of this!" gasped Jack.

"No? I was expecting Carruthers to come out and arrest you. That's what held me more than anything else, you know. The initials."

Jack nooded slowly. "That is probably what has kept them from coming after me. *Your* initials."

* * *

McQuirey slipped smoothly into the ranch work. He could wrangle horses and steers with the best of them. The punchers took to his breezy and friendly personality and contributed wearing apparel until he looked quite presentable. He said nothing about himself, and was constantly at work.

The matter of the mysterious bondsman whom McQuirey had not known became of paramount interest. Harrison broached the subject to the two Montagues.

"Where does this here new cowhand fit in?" he demanded. "Is he guilty uh anything?"

"No," replied Bill Montague. "As to where he fits in—I expect he's

got all of Lebanon pretty well puzzled."

"I've been wondering if I didn't make a mistake when I showed Owens that affidavit of Myers," said Jack softly.

"I wouldn't put anything past any one of that gang," said Harrison. "Yore dad scared 'em to death at cards last fall, and you licked th' socks offa Owens, but do yuh think little things like that will stop men like Owens an' his sheriff pet, or Jackson, or Carter, or Tilby?"

"It might stop Tilby," mused the elder Montague. "He had better stuff in him once. And it had better stop the others—at least until we get this Nightbird affair cleaned up."

"If they're going to attempt anything over that knife, I wish they'd start something," chafed Jack. "I'm going in to see Owens today and talk beef shipments with him. I'll give him all the chance in the world to start something."

"Why, Bill," said the foreman, "yuh ain't gonna ship with Owens after that peach trouble, are yuh?"

"He controls all the stock pens and freight houses of the railroad that touches Lebanon," reminded the elder Montague. "You know it isn't practical to ship by steamboat. Memphis is no market."

JACK RODE whistling into town. Mr. Owens, to his surprise, was reported out of the city. Before returning to the ranch, he wandered over to the courthouse. There was an excited little knot of men in the room where Judge Ryan presided.

"What's up?" he asked curiously.

"Th' bank at Licker-up was looted last night an' two men was shot," said a man.

"What!"

"'Sfact. Six men headed by uh feller in th' usual ridin' cloak rode into th' town at three o'clock an' robbed th' bank. They was interrupted by two men who come along goin' home an' th' devils shot 'em both. They rode off with seven thousand dollars."

"Kill them?"

"Not dead yet."

"I suppose the majority of the Licker-up men were in Lebanon for their monthly spree," commented Jack.

"That's th' reason we figured Nightbird pulled th' trick," responded his informant. "The bandits knowed th' town was short uh men."

Licker-up was a settlement north of Lebanon, across the river. The male inhabitants found four saloons tame when there were fifty within ten miles. Hence had come custom of month-ends at Lebanon. Nightbird, who invariably wore a black riding cloak and who never failed in a raid, had waited for a favorable moment and scored again.

Jack rode home in a thoughtful mood. The cloud hanging over his own head and the increasing outbreaks worried him greatly. The consensus of public opinion had laid the murder of the station agent at the door of Nightbird. Jack had reason for thinking otherwise.

He was riding through Hawkins' Draw when his hat whipped suddenly from his head and he heard the vicious whine of a bullet. Instantly he fell forward on his horse's neck, spurring the animal into a gallop as he looked back under his arm. A dark figure stood against a tree on the right-hand knoll. The sunlight glinted upon a rifle barrel.

"Hoss, bushwacking always makes me mad," Jack admitted to his mount. "I wonder who the devil that was?"

When he reached the ranch Harrison had other news for him.

"Jack, McQuirey was out all night, and stove up Blackie with a lame forefoot."

"Where is he now?" asked young Montague.

"'Sposed to be out ridin' herd."

"When he comes in, send him up to the house, will you?"

"Where's yore hat?"

"Lost it in Hawkins' Draw," said Jack laconically.

"That's nice," grunted Harrison. "Which one d'yuh tag?"

"Nobody. Rifle practice." Jack turned toward the ranchouse.

"My Gawd!" groaned the foreman.

"He thinks bein' in love entitles him to uh charmed life. I see I gotta go to town an' make it safe for th' innocent to roam around . . . Hey, Frank! Whoopee! "C'mere, cowboy."

The puncher came loping up. Drawing rein, he made a mocking salaam.

"Der kink uf Swaden," he saluted.

"Uumph!" grunted Harrison. "Round up McQuirey an' tell him th' bosses want to see him at th' house. Tell him to rub some more liniment on Blackie's leg tonight, too, sure. I'm goin' in. Be back 'fore sundown."

The puncher rode out eastward on the range. On the sunny slope of a hillock he came upon the new cowhand stretched out and snoring, his horse grazing lazily.

The puncher gazed down at the recumbent form with hat drawn over face. A well-directed shot would spin the hat away and rudely awaken the sleeper. Frank grinned as he reached toward his holster. Abruptly the snores ceased.

"Get thee behind him, Satan," said McQuirey from under his hat. "Don't do anything funny, cowboy, or I'll chase you clear across Richelieu County."

"Yuh ain't got no business havin' windows in yore hat," complained Frank crossly. "Git up, Musilage. Mr. Montague an' Jack wants to see yuh. An' Jim says not to forgit to rub Blackie's leg again tonight."

"Kee-rect." McQuirey grinned, stroking an imaginary beard.

He sprang lithely to his surprised horse's back.

"Yuy ain't forgot *him* yet!" cried Frank.

"Nor soon," flung McQuirey as he rode toward the ranchhouse.

He found the elder Montague at his desk in the big living room listening to Jack who was talking to him earnestly. The puncher strolled up to the desk. Jack turned to face him.

"McQuirey," he said, "where were you last night?"

"Oh, riding around to blow the cow smell off of me."

"Weren't over near Licker-up, were you?"

"Can't say that I was—exactly. Why?"

"The bank was looted and two citizens were shot."

"Nightbird?" asked McQuirey.

"I guess so."

"Anybody blaming the unsuspecting bystander again?"

"Not yet," said the elder Montague. "But how did you lame Blackie?"

The puncher met his gaze squarely.

"Running away from a gang of mounted men I wasn't prepared to and didn't want to meet," he admitted frankly.

The ranchman looked at his son.

"Will that be all?" asked the puncher softly.

"As far as we are concerned," returned Jack, "yes."

9

SHIFTING his holster forward the DZX foreman stepped into the lobby of the *Texas Hotel* for the first time since the day he had been carried out on a shutter.

At sight of the dusty, grim Harrison the clerk's jaw sagged. Revenge—trouble—more violence—gun shots crowded through his mind as he watched Harrison advance. A dampening silence fell over the lobby as every eye turned toward the DZX foreman. No one moved.

"Yuh oughta have th' sheriff here to accompany yuh on his chin trombone," suggested Harrison to the trembling clerk as he balanced himself before the desk. "Is Jackson in?"

"I don't know," stammered the uncertain young man behind the desk.

"In th' barroom," called a voice from behind the foreman.

Harrison walked to the entrance of the hotel's saloon. He glanced entirely around and then, in two quick strides, stepped through and to one side of the door, placing a solid

wall between him and the men in the lobby.

He singled out the gambler of the cold, sneering eyes and handsome features. Harrison walked toward him.

Almost magically there was a semicircle about the two men, with the bar devoid of human life. The man who had been conferring with Jackson dropped back. The bartender glanced at the plate glass mirror behind the bar and shrugged resignedly.

Jackson eyed the DZX foreman calmly. He did not make the mistake of going for his gun in sheer panic. Instead, he eyed Harrison critically, then turned his back and poured whisky into his glass. He tossed the liquor down his throat and shoved the bottle and glass away.

Harrison ignored the insult. "Jackson," he drawled softly, "I craves to ask yuh jes' one li'l question."

The gambler turned his head indifferently and bent his hard gaze on the foreman. He drew slowly back from the bar, allowing himself more freedom of movement.

"I want to know can yuh tell me anything 'bout th' shootin' at Jack Montague in Hawkins' Draw 'long noon? If not, can yuh direct me to somebody as has any information?"

Everyone strained to hear the gambler's response. This was news. Someone shooting at Montague? "Just what do you mean?" Jackson said at length in a silky voice.

"Jes' what I said. Somebody has been indulgin' in uh li'l target practice with Jack Montague's back for a target. I come in to warn somebody it ain't safe to so continue."

"The young man being too timid to speak for himself, I presume," drawled Jackson. "Or was he killed?"

"They missed—if yuh haven't heard."

The tense audience strained their ears for the crash of .45s. But the silence remained unbroken.

"No, I hadn't heard," replied Jackson disinterestedly, as he flicked an imaginary speck from the sleeve of his coat.

"Then yuh don't know anything 'bout it?" queried Harrison.

Jackson's voice was low and studiedly insulting. "If you are inquiring in your crude, boorish way if *I* fired at Montague's back, the only satisfactory answer I can give you is —if I had, I wouldn't have missed."

The foreman expelled a long breath. "Thanks," he stated calmly. "I'm plumb happy to see we both admits yuh ain't above doin' th' shootin'."

He turned and walked out of the barroom.

JACKSON watched him, an unfathomable look in his eyes. Then he reached once more for the bottle and glass and poured a stiff libation. He raised the glass, and his composure gave way. Such profound hatred leaped into his eyes that no one present even dreamed of smiling at his pallor.

He waited until he could trust his face to mask his emotions, then followed the street, his step firm.

Crossing the street to Owens' General Store, he ascended the stairs to the third floor. Stepping to the door marked, *L.A. Owens—Real Estate*, he walked in, and stood staring moodily at the three men seated before him.

Owens sat behind his desk. A pair of worn riding gloves lay on the flat surface before him. Carter sat in a tilted chair, with Tilby nearby. The men looked curiously at the new arrival's gloomy face.

"Well?" Owens clipped.

"Who shot at Montague this morning?" demanded Jackson. "You, Carter?"

Carter looked up queerly. "Why me? Am I the official executioner?"

Tilby flushed slightly under Jackson's inquiring glance. "You know I never shoot or stab anybody from behind," he stated distinctly.

"So you knew it was from behind, eh?" Jackson laughed.

"What about it?" demanded Carter.

"Why in hell did he miss?" raged Jackson. "Did you give orders for this, Horsehead?"

Owens only grunted.

"You know I wanted things to quiet down before we did anything else. Now, that long-legged jackknife Harrison rode all the way to town to accuse me. And I was powerless to make a move because this Myers affair is still hanging. Owens, I can't stand this much longer. Why the devil hasn't young Montague been arrested for the murder of the station agent? You know that was his knife. What's Carruthers doing? Running around sticking up placards about this rustler Nightbird?"

"You know the trouble," growled Owens. "That tramp—McQuirey—stumbled into town at the wrong moment. Scared Carruthers to death. Had same initials, too. Bonded by stranger he claimed he didn't know. Bondsman's initials same."

"More than one person can identify the knife as young Montague's," commented Carter.

"You were willing to let the matter rest, at first," reminded Owens.

"We've been all over this before," grated Jackson. "You are not so patient yourself, Horsehead. If something doesn't happen shortly you can't expect me to keep my hands off. Make this charge against Jack Montague go through now. Carruthers had better arrest somebody, or you won't be dictating to a sheriff next term."

"Why not arrest all three of the men in question?" suggested Carter. "McQuirey and Montague and the mysterious bondsman who can be found, doubtless."

"A good idea, Carter," endorsed Jackson. "This clever cowboy tramp is an unknown quantity around here. Lock him up without bond this time. Do Montague and the bondsman the same."

"But is such an action legal?" remonstrated Tilby.

"What difference does it make?" declared Jackson. "Carruthers is taking his orders from Owens. What do you say, Horsehead?"

"Send Carruthers to me," jerked the realtor...

THREE DAYS before the murder of the station agent at Lebanon, a lean, tired-looking man rode into the farmyard of Blaine's fruit ranch and swung stiffly to the ground. He carried an ancient sawed-off shotgun which he handled affectionately. His horse looked as weary as its rider.

"Evening," Henry Blaine said.

"Howdy," returned the stranger. "Can yuh put me up fer th' night?"

"Yes, indeed," Blaine replied heartily. "You've come a long way, I take it. Lead your mount right into the barn."

"Thanks. I come from quite uh ways th' other side uh th' Canadian. Me an' Hercules has kivered lots uh territory together. My name's Martin—Jed Martin."

"Mine is Blaine. Just turn Hercules into that far stall. There's a feeding already there and hay above in the rack. He can get water out here at the trough in the barnyard.

They walked together to the house where Patty was placing supper before the two hired hands. They sat down to a bountiful table. Martin listened to Patty's vivacious chatter and admired her quick wit. She was a revelation to him. He had never seen a woman like her before, and wonder engulfed him at her beauty.

After supper, Blaine showed him to a spare room that almost frightened him by its orderly cleanliness.

Jed Martin had a brighter look the next morning. On his homely, lined face was a kindly expression despite the stern features. After breakfast he broached the matter he had evidently been mulling over.

"Yuh got a likely place here, Mr. Blaine," he said. "It looks like uh real good farm. Where I come from th' soil is pore an' stony."

"Where do you come from, if that is a fair question?" Blaine inquired.

"Down in th' Kimish Mountings in southwestern Arkansaw. I ain't been home in nigh onto five year now an' I'm kinda homesick fer farmin'. I'm jes' a plain farmer an' mounting man an' I wonder could yuh use uh extry hand fer uh spell?"

"Unfortunately I've done little on the farm proper, having spent most

of my time this year on peaches," said the fruit grower. "And fall is here now. There won't be much to do except care for the stock. I really don't need any more help. I'm sorry."

"Mebbe I didn't make my idee plain. I'm aimin' to stay in this part uv th' country fer uh spell and I'd be willin' to work fer my board an' keep an' fodder fer Hercules. Hercules kin work, too. An' everybody else 'round here is ranchin', ain't they?"

"I've the only farm around Lebanon," murmured Blaine. "But I would be ashamed to offer a man such wages. I'm sorry, but I'm just getting on my feet here."

"But 'sposin' I insist on workin' under them conditions?"

"I never turn anyone away from my table," returned Blaine simply. "You're welcome to stay, if you wish."

"Thanks," said Martin. "I won't fergit it."

Martin proved to be a willing worker. Except for one trip to town, four days later, he stayed close to the farm.

Bit by bit he overcame his native reticence, and Blaine was not greatly surprised one day to find Martin baring to him the unwavering resolve of his life.

"SO TH' NEXT day Hugh was drivin' back from the railroad which was nigh onto forty mile away," Martin was saying, "an' he was drivin' th'ough Li'l Windy Gap when he spied this here stranger a-walkin' 'long, powerful tired. 'Course Hugh give him a lift. Th' feller said his name was Thompson an' he was on his way to Texas. Hugh ast him to stop over fer uh spell an' jes' after they turned off onto th' right fork this here snake reaches behind him, picks up Hugh's shotgun, and shoots my brother right in th' head."

Martin clenched his lean, brown hands in recollection of that tragedy. "He went th'ough Hugh's clothes an' tumbled him over into th' road an' driv off. Killin' uh man fer uh pair uh hosses an' mebbe five or ten dollars!"

"But, Martin, how did you find out how the murder was committed?"

"When we set out to look fer Hugh four days later when he didn't show up," replied Martin, "they hadn't nobody else been along th' road. We found where Thompson had throwed Hugh out into th' road and searched him. Uh li'l farther on we found th' gun an' seen where th' hosses jumped when he fired th' gun. An' back in Li'l Windy Gap was the stranger's footprints where he'd been walkin'. We could tell he was uh purty big man."

"And you found Hugh?" prompted Blaine gently.

"Yep," replied Martin queerly. "He had drug hisself two hundred yards th'ough th' timber of Deer-lick Spring after water. Gawd only knows how long it tuck him. An' when he got there—" Martin's face twitched spasmodically. "When he got there th' damn spring was dry.

"That's where we found him. I run down to him, cussin' out loud, an' jes' as I got to him, he opened his eyes. 'That you, Jed?' he said. 'I been waitin' fer yuh.'

"Yuh can't never know how I felt, Mr. Blaine. He'd been there four days 'thout no water even, jes' uh sufferin' an' waitin' fer me. We never thought uh him bein' lost or hurt 'cause uh mountaineer knows his mountings. If I'd uh been there mebbe I could have got him to a doctor. Anyway I could of got him water. There he was, still in his right mind, a-knowin' he was gonna die, sufferin' and alone, and four days ahead of me was his murderer jes' drivin' off peaceable."

After a silence he continued.

"We made Hugh as comf'table as we could, but he died 'fore we could git uh wagon there. That was more'n four years ago. I ain't caught up with Thompson yit an' I been all over Texas."

"How do you expect to recognize him?" questioned the fruit grower gently.

"I'll never miss him if he's alive," stated Martin positively. "Hugh lived long enough to tell me his name an' everything. He said th' feller had

uh rabbit mouth that quivered like he couldn't he'p it, an' close-set eyes an' uh square kind of scar 'bout th' size of uh half-dollar in th' middle of his recedin' chin."

Blaine shook his head slowly.

"There's no one that description fits around these parts that I'm aware of," he said at length.

"I ain't in no hurry now," affirmed the Arkansan. "I been chasin' down fellers that was said to tally with that description fer goin' on to five year now an' mebbe I'll find him when I least expect to."

Blaine gazed out over the rolling country with retrospective eyes. He had received a glimpse of a life behind that curtain which veils all human souls that startled him with somber thoughts. Through the medium of the lanky Arkansan's voice he could see the cabins perched crazily on rocky hillsides, the drab women with their bare feet, faded bonnets and colorless lives. He saw the individual passions, the flames of primitive love and hate, the unyielding code of honesty and of a life for a life.

He could see a weeping woman in her patched calico apron, two or three half-clad children clinging to her in fearful and uncomprehending wonderment as the limp form of the husband and father was carried into the cabin and laid on the rustling corn shuck mattress—a victim of the deadly feuds of the mountains.

"*This* certainly is God's country, Martin," Blaine murmured softly.

"Yep, I reckon it is. But th' mountaineer loves his mountings."

10

"GO GET YOUNG Montague and McQuirey, Carruthers," Owens said heavily.

The sheriff was astounded. "How's that? Git Montague now? I thought after that tramp mix—"

Horsehead Owens glared steadily into the beady orbs of the sheriff.

"But—but how about McQuirey's bond—Judge Ryan—" faltered the uneasy officer.

"Leave to me," clipped Owens. "Get 'em. Also, find that bondsman."

"Kee-rect," Carruthers managed to quaver and turned weakly to go.

Sheriff Carruthers was troubled. He did not anticipate a pleasant journey nor a delectable reception at his predetermined destination. There were reasons—about thirty of them. Hence, an hour later found a posse of forty men, hard-faced and silent, heading south.

The opinion of the better citizens of Richelieu County might be summed up in the comment of Curly Matthews as he made out the identity of a number of the riders through the dusk.

"My gosh!" he exclaimed. "Somebody must of hung th' high sign on th' *Texas Hotel*. Looky what's on th' move."

The punchers peered out at the visitors. Almost as one man they deployed and drew their guns as the posse rode up to the D Z X corrals.

"Hey!" shouted Carruthers. "No fireworks now, boys. This here is uh posse."

"Much obliged for th' information," called Frank. "We was figurin' th' posse 'bout half a mile behind yuh."

"We come peaceable to ast yuh fer that feller McQuirey," continued Carruthers.

"What's he gone an' done now?" Curly asked wonderingly.

"Where *is* McQuirey?" whispered one of the punchers. "I don't see him."

A murmur of surprise ran around the ring of D X Z men. The posse milled their horse impatiently.

"What's wrong here?" asked the cool, even voice of Jack Montague as he came from the ranchhouse with Harrison. The elder Montague came from the neighborhood of the bunkhouse.

"We come to git uh man accused of Myers' murder," stated the sheriff. "Don't resist th' law, young man. Make yore punchers put up their

hardware an' let us git this business over with. We wants McQuirey... Mr. Montague, I got to git two men here."

"Golly!" put in Curly. "At first he wanted only McQuirey. Th' longer he stays th' more he wants."

"Who is the other man you want?" demanded the elder Montague crisply.

"They's been developments," stated the sheriff carefully, "an' I gotta —I'll hafta ask yore son to come along till we git things straight."

The punchers surged forward with a roar, and Harrison sprang quickly before the angered men.

"Careful, boys," cautioned the ranchman clamly. "Sheriff, we have no intention of resisting the law. However, you might explain matters a bit. I understood that McQuirey had been arrested and bailed out once already. As for my son, just how do your developments concern him?"

"I ain't at liberty to tell, but th' clue lays suspicion on both uh them."

"Just what do you mean?" grated Jack, taking a swift step toward the sheriff.

"Easy, son, easy," admonished his father. "Let's get this straight. McQuirey! Come forward."

"He ain't here, Mr. Montague," spoke up Frank.

"What's that?" howled Carruthers. "Dismount, men, and surround th' chuckhouse first."

"There's no use," broke in Harrison in a dangerous, flat-toned voice. "McQuirey ain't here; if he was, he'd step up for Mr. Montague."

"Hunt for him," snarled Carruthers. "He's likely on th' place."

"My men will help you," said the rancher shortly.

"An'—an'—" hesitated Carruthers.

"And I will be right here, watching every move you make," purred Jack. "*You* can't get away from *me* now until you explain yourself.

FAINTLY Carruthers waved his cohorts on to the search. Why was Owens such a fool? Couldn't the man see the terrible danger in this young tiger? Earnestly Carruthers wished himself out of the mess.

The search was short-lived. Two of the posse approached the bunkhouse and espied a square of gleaming white pinned to the door. One of them struck a match and they saw marks on the paper.

"Hey, Sheriff!" one called. "C'mere, quick!"

Deputized men and punchers mingled together before the closed door, animosity engulfed in their common curiosity.

The paper proved to be a message, brief and cryptic.

Dear Sheriff:

It is the cream of several curdled jests that you should be hunting me. Did finding out that I was worth ten thousand dollars make you think I ought to be safely locked away at night? Sorry I couldn't stay to bid you good-by again. I trust it doesn't happen a third time. I have learned much from you, particularly a well rounded lesson on headwork and gratitude. Perhaps I may be allowed to some day explain.

Until a more propituous meeting,

J. M.

"Damnation!" ejaculated Carruthers. "I dunno what he means by all this gingerbread but I can tell yuh we've let Nightbird git away from us."

Cries of unbelief rang out. Even the members of the posse were astounded.

"Have you any proof of your statement?" demanded Montague, senior.

"Not jes' yit," reluctantly admitted Carruthers. "But that's th' theory I'm followin' an' it seems to be showin' results."

"And now," said Jack, slipping squarely before the angry officer, "just what has this to do with me?"

In his badgered position Carruthers became reckless.

"You?" he exclaimed belligerently. "Well, where was you on th' night th' station agent was murdered? Huh?"

"I was in Lebanon that night until twelve o'clock."

"Kee-rect." The sheriff stroked his

beard triumphantly. "Yuh was in town, Myers was killed that night, uh knife was found with yore initials on it in th' cashbox uh th' express company's safe, an' yuh was seen to lose at roulette. Now can yuh see any connection, young feller?"

"No." Jack smiled coldly. "I can't."

"I gotta explain, have I?" inquired the sheriff caustically. "Well, is or ain't your initials J. M. ? An' where is yore knife?"

"Here," snapped the young man swiftly, and produced his knife.

"Lordamighty!" cried Carruthers wildly. "Didn't yuh lose—I mean ain't that uh different knife?"

"Jes' what are yuh talkin' about?" queried Harrison.

"I got uh knife jes' like that—initials an' all—in my office," Carruthers stated, "an' Myers was killed with it. I don't care about this knife none whatever. Young feller, yuh gotta go back to town with me."

"Gotta go?" whispered Jack softly, and a peculiar gleam came into his eye.

"Kee-rect," snapped Carruthers.

"Have yuh got enough men to take him?" asked Harrison, while Jack calmly opened the knife.

"Now, now, Harrison," cried the officer hastily, "I'm jes' doin' my duty."

HE CAUGHT sight of the open blade and attempted to draw back. But the crush of men about him effectually prevented this maneuver.

"What are you doing, son?" cried the elder Montague sharply.

"That bunch of alfalfa is a dang nuisance and Carruthers has cheated the barber long enough," stated Jack rapidly. "I'm going to shave him right now." His hand shot out and caught the sheriff's beard, amid yells of delight from the punchers.

"Help!" s c r e a m e d Carruthers. "He's gonna kill me! Shoot him somebody! Quick!"

Remorselessly Jack raised his knife swiftly. Sing Li brought a lantern closer. The eyes of the sheriff went glassy. He gurgled and his knees gave way. Had it not been for Jack's hold on his beard he would have slipped to the ground.

"Wait, Jack," laughed Harrison. "The' dang fool's fainted with fear. One uh you boys git uh bucket uh water."

"Stop!" ordered Bill Montague. "Jack! You've scared the man to death. Can't you see?"

Slowly the glare went out of Jack's eyes and the light of sanity returned.

"My God, boy," breathed his father.

"Put up that knife. It is best for you to go to town with this posse. If a man is under suspicion—no man is to big to be arrested. Come to one side with me for a moment."

After a brief interval during which Carruthers was helped into his saddle, they returned. Jack saddled his horse and mounted without a word.

"Carruthers," stated Bill Montague as the posse turned to go, "my son goes with you alone and unarmed, of his own volition. He is obeying the law and is under the law's protection. See that he arrives in Lebanon safely and remains safe until his return to this ranch. Understand?"

The sheriff nodded weakly. The posse swung out and headed toward town.

Montague stood gazing after them, two harsh, grim lines about his mouth.

"Damn Owens," he said aloud.

"Plenty damns," added Sing Li gravely.

"Bill," Harrison said piteously. "yuh ain't gonna let Jack spend uh night in jail, are yuh? Jes' say th' word an' we'll go git him right now."

"He won't be the first DZX puncher to stay overnight in jail."

"But this is murder, Bill!"

"Let's get to the table," Montague said abruptly. "You punchers hit for the chuckhouse. *Pronto.*"

The men filed into the long room, Montague following. The usually boisterous punchers were quiet and low-voiced. The rancher seated himself at the head of the table, not even glancing at the mutely vacant seat at the other end.

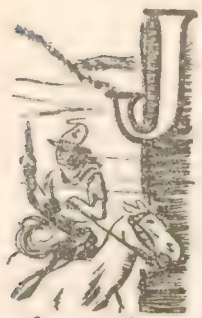
As Sing Li began pouring the coffee, Harrison dropped his head on his arms.

"An' he sent him off without any supper," he cried brokenly. "Li'l Jack."

A suspicious moisture appeared in the ranchman's eyes as he glanced at Harrison's graying hair. But his lips tightened and his lean face became stern and formidable.

"Hell!" whispered Frank to Curly. "He thinks Jack is guilty!"

11



JUDGE RYAN was angry. And when the legal oracle of Lebanon was aroused it meant an unpleasant time for somebody.

He ran through the docket with a burst of speed which dazzled his overworked clerk, and went home for his riding horse, to call on William Montague, cattle king.

When he rode up to the pair of cowpunchers who leaned and talked so earnestly together against the rails of one of the DZX corrals, they proved so engrossed that they failed to look up. This did not improve the judge's humor.

"Say, ye spalpeens," he boomed, "act interested at seein' distinguished company. Where th' hill is yer boss?"

"I think he's up at th' house," one of them said woodenly.

"Bejabbers, but 'tis an animated bunch. Where's th' funeral to be held?"

"Dunno, Judge."

"'Spose ye spill yer trouble to me," suggested Ryan. "'Tis barely possible I can put ye right."

"You tell him, Frank," urged one.

"It's thisaway, Judge," complied Frank. "About forty reasons why Lebanon ain't Christian come out here last night after Jack an' McQuirey on a fishy charge regardin' th' murder last month. McQuirey seen 'em comin' an' slipped off. Th' sheriff took Jack in and Mr. Montague wouldn't let us put up any resistance a-tall. Now McQuirey's gone with uh good hoss an' saddle while Jack—"

"—languishes in jail," supplied Curly.

"Th' new puncher shouldn't of run off an' left Jack to face th' music. We kinda liked McQuirey, but we sure don't like this way uh doin'. An'—"

"We don't want Jack in jail even if th' whole railroad system went dead," growled Curly.

"Th' verdict is unanimous," declared the judge. "But just ye rest easy, b'ys, an' we'll fix things in spite o' th' gang what's pesterin' Jack. Mebbe before th' case comes to trial we can make plenty o' trouble for some busybodies."

Judge Ryan wheeled his horse and rode up to the porch of the ranchhouse, heaved his formidable bulk out of the saddle. As he set foot to the ground the big mare wheezed in relief.

"Ye're a domn liar, Maggie," bellowed the indignant judge. "I don't weigh a pound over two fifty. Montague! Montague! Where the hill are ye?"

"Here, Judge, in the living room," answered the ranchman's steady voice. "Come right on in."

"William Montague, what in hill's wrong wid ye, lettin' Jack stay in jail?" flung the judge, as he approached. "An' why haven't ye come right in to put up bond, outrage though 'tis? Ye waitin' for th' mysterious bondsman to bail him out, too?"

Montague winked at the red-faced man. "Judge, this bailing philanthropist might do that very thing—if we will only wait."

Ryan snorted. "If they didn't slap him into jail. His initials are J.M., too. I'm ashamed o' ye, William Montague, plumb ashamed. Ye act like Jack might be Nightbird himself."

"Rumor is a hellish thing, Judge," the rancher commented quietly.

"Some good folks hereabouts already have that idea, doubtless. And you know how hard it is to root out a false idea."

The judge's chair protested creakingly as he fairly flung himself out of it. Leaning over the desk beside which Montague stood, he gurgled: "Montague, ye talk like a jackass."

The rancher smiled slightly. Then his face became grim. "Have you observed Jack closely since his meeting with Owens that day at Blaine's?" he asked seriously.

"Not particularly," rejoined Ryan. "Why?"

"Blaine told me it was a glorious fight. Something wild, something I have feared for years, came to life in Jack that day. As it stands he is in the center of the scales. One way lies self-control, happiness, and stability. The other is the life of—a ruthless killer."

"I don't belave it," snorted the judge. "If th' lad's own good common sense can't keep him straight sure an' th' girl can."

"I hope so," breathed the rancher. "But when people begin noticing the difference in him, they're not going to put that murder past him—they're not going to put Nightbird past him."

"I'm bettin' on Jack," stated the judge, "an' don't ye forget it. How can Jack be taken for Nightbird even wan instant? Ye'll be admittin' he was locked up safe an' tight last night, won't ye? Well, last night John Perth, just west o' ye here, lost two hundred head o' choice cattle to Nightbird, ridin' cloak, gang an' all. An' one o' Perth's punchers was killed. Does this squelch her Nightbird theory?"

"Cowpuncher *killed?*" exclaimed Montague. "This is the first killing to be accredited to Nightbird, isn't it? Outside of the station agent."

RYAN LOOKED blank. "What th' hill are ye drivin' at?"

"How sure are you that Nightbird conducted last night's raid?" demanded the ranchman.

"Ye know 'tis reported that Nightbird never makes a raid unless he is present. An' there was no mistakin' his whiny voice, Perth said."

"All right," Montague conceded. "Perhaps that will lift suspicion from Jack's shoulders. But it doesn't clear him of the station agent's murder and the fact that his knife was found there."

"Hill's bills an' sivin divils!" roared the judge. "Ye are worse than an endless chain o' kind-thoughts-great-happiness letters. What I want to know is why haven't ye bonded th' b'y? An' where did this young smart McQuirey go? He might be mixed up in this Nightbird business."

"I am beginning to think that likely."

"To hill wid him for th' present. Here ye are. Sign this paper for Jack, makin' yerself liable for one thousand dollars in cas he skips th' country. I made it as light as I could. Gimme Jack's gun an' I'll be takin' it to him. I'll send him home this evenin'. Shut up an' sign. Sure an' I've had enough o' yer foolishness. 'Twill look better for his father to go his bond instead o' th' judge before whom he was arraigned."

Wordlessly Montague signed and returned the paper to the judge who bowed politely.

"Thank ye, sorr, an' good mornin'." The judge spoke in honeyed accents. "Ye are very kind an' gracious, ye—domned hardhead."

He heard Montague's laughter follow him out to the veranda.

He met the foreman of the ranch coming up the steps.

"Mornin', Judge," Harrison greeted.

"Top o' th' mornin', Jim," Ryan responded, and eyed Harrison.

What he saw caused him to swing quickly and look up and down the road. His eye caught sight of two trails of dust toward the south.

"Where are those two young fire eaters goin', Jim?" he demanded.

"Danged if I know, Judge," rejoined Harrison sheepishly. "They jes' told me I could give 'em uh week's lay-off or I could fire 'em,

they didn't care which. They're purty good cowpunchers, Judge."

"D'ye think McQuirey'll be glad to see 'em?"

Harrison grinned slightly. "I dunno. But they'll be powerful glad to see him."

"I have me doubts o' them findin' him," commented Ryan. "He's wan slick divil. But th' b y s were in too big a hurry, Jim. Jack is comin' home as soon as I can coax Maggie back to Lebanon."

The quick light of happiness that leaped to the foreman's eyes amply repaid the judge for all his trouble.

"Whist, Jim," he said, lowering his voice, "there's gonna be hill a-poppin' wan o' these days. If there is, Jim, do all o' Jack's killin' for him. D'ye understand me?"

The grizzled old foreman, explainsman and Indian fighter, solemnly held out his hand and the judge clasped it.

* * *

THE MOON was on the wane, and the rolling, undulating country surrounding the DZX Ranch lay like a ghostly fairyland in the half-light.

A nocturnal visitor who exercised great care and secrecy was creeping stealthily across the front veranda, hugging the wall of the house as he crept toward the front door. The window shades were drawn and it was only upon close inspection that the prowler could detect the faint glow of a light behind the opaque curtains.

The man tried the door gently. It was barred on t h e inside. He scratched slightly on one of the panels. There was no response. Almost petulantly he flung back his riding cloak, drew a six-shooter from its holster, and tapped lightly upon the glass.

At length there came a soft shuffling of feet and Sing Li opened the door. He held up his lantern to peer into the visitor's face.

He saw a well-set-up, swarthy complexioned man with snapping black eyes. Crisply w a x e d mustachios pointed arrogantly upward. T h e stranger was attired in Mexican bell-bottomed trousers laced with gold, fancy vest laced with the same cord, short jacket with lace cuffs, all of crimson velvet. A high-crowned sombrero, with engraved *chapa* and chin straps, sat on the back of his head. The riding cloak of rich material partially concealed his wide cartridge belt with slender knife sheath on the left, and tied-down gun holster on the right.

He smiled politely at the unblinking Oriental, a row of even white teeth contrasting with his dark face and mustache.

"Wen one look through keyhole an' weesh to be unobserve eet ees best to put out light," he advised.

"No makee diff to Sing Li," informed the Chinese. "You know me see. Velly fine."

The Mexican shrugged slightly.

"Senor Monteegue—ees he still arise?" he asked softly.

Sing Li bowed gravely.

"*Bueno.* I weesh to spik wit heem." He replaced his gun in its holster. "To knock on thee door," he explained.

"Slip 'lonside flont loom, me follow," said Sing Li.

The Mexican quickly entered, hastily closing and barring the door behind him. Walking ahead of Sing Li he paused before the door opening into Montague's office and tapped gently on the panel.

"Sing Li?" came the voice of Bill Montague.

"You catchee Mexican man makee call. Alle same come in?"

"Admit him."

"Walk velly slow an makee no funny motion," admonished Sing Li as the Mexican entered the room, closely followed by the Chinese with one arm tucked into the other sleeve.

MONTAGUE sat in an armchair before the fireplace studying a relief map of the country. He looked up and his gaze traveled slowly over the fastidious costume, from sombrero down to riding boots. His eyes widened the merest trifle as they took in the black cloak.

"Senor Monteegue?" said the man.

The rancher said, in a conventional tone: *"Si, senor. Es Vd. Mejicano?"*

"Si, si, senor," responded the other gaily. *"Hablas Espanol?"*

"I do," replied Montague in English. "You wish to see me?"

"Si, senor. I weesh to spik wit you in private."

"You may proceed. Sing Li and I understand each other perfectly."

"Pancho Diaz—my name, senor."

"Will you remove your cloak, senor?"

"I will retain my cloak," the Mexican said as he took a proffered chair. "I have tell you my name, senor. My occupation"— he shrugged —"she ees making *dinero.* I have come to talk wit you on one bueesness of importance to you."

"Well?"

"You have eet a *vaquero* and a son who have arrest for murder, *si?* Thee shereeff he have possession of thee knife which he use, si? You weesh to know who really keel thee station agent, *si?*"

"Well?"

"Pancho Diaz can help you," said the Mexican complacently.

"Are you coming to me with definite proof?"

"Alas, senor. I have no proof by your honorable courthouse standards, but I have eet a way. You weesh to free your son?"

"My son is upstairs in bed right now."

The Mexican arched his brows in surprise. "Ah, *bueno.* But thee stigma? She steel remain, senor."

"What have you discovered?"

"I know who keel Myers and I know how, when and why," said the Mexican suddenly. "The murderer had a dummy package in thee safe an' he call on thee agent at ten o'clock. Thee agent admeet heem an' open thee safe for thee package. Then—pfsst! He ees keel wit knife Jack Montague have lose, thee safe ees rifle, an' thee knife she ees leave. Thee evidence ees strong."

The rancher nodded thoughtfully. "You *know* it to have been done in this manner?"

"I do, senor."

"Was it Owens?" The rancher's hands gripped the arms of his chair.

"No, eet was not Senor Owens, nor Senor Carruthers," replied Diaz sadly.

"Who was it then, man?" groaned Montague.

"Eet was Senor Carter."

"What? Are you positive?"

"Si, senor," responded the Mexican, calmly rolling a delicate cigarette.

"Show me your proof."

"I have none," rejoined Diaz airily.

"Then what is your motive in telling me this?" demanded his host in exasperation.

"Carramba!" Diaz ejaculated. "You would ask a Latin thees question?" He glared fiercely. "A Latin may have many motives but they are all of one sex."

"Bah!" retorted the ranchman shortly. "If you can't prove Carter guilty what do you expect me to do?"

"Trap heem, then keel heem or hang heem, as you weel," returned Pancho Diaz indifferently.

"Some of us do abide by the law around here," said Montague caustically.

"Es Lastima! What a shame!" rejoined Diaz coolly. "A scoundrel always goes ahead wit hees schemes where thee honest man hesitate. I do not see anything so dishonest een thee suggestion I made you."

"Suppose a plot should result in the death of Carter and he should be innocent?"

The Mexican laughed lightly. *"Nevaire,* senor. Not ees such a theeng posseeble."

"How do you know so much about it—without any proof? And are you sure you can't tell something about another matter which is important to this country? I mean Nightbird."

"No," Diaz said at length. "I have notheeng to say about thee gentleman. One theeng I tell you. Study well your map. I must go. You weel not settle matters with Senor Carter?"

"I do not see how I can for the present."

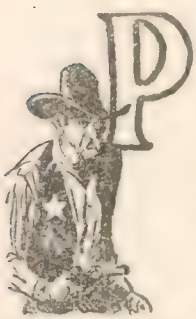
"Alas! *Buenos Nochas.* Eef you weel put down thee lights for one moment I weel go out thees window here."

The host made a sign and Sing Li blew out the lights. With only the soft glow from the fireplace to light his departure the midnight visitor slipped lithely through the window and was gone.

Montague lolled back in his chair as Sing Li relighted the lamps. The ranchman was thankful that Jack had not heard the accusation against Carter.

"Diaz has done nothing but point out a certain man for me to hate, Sing Li," he mused. "The situation is not bettered a bit."

12



PERHAPS forty miles due south of the DZX Ranch, a wide cleft in the circling rim of mountains formed a natural gateway to Texas. This wide place in the road had been appropriated by a red-faced, red-haired, fishy-blue-eyed, broken-nosed individual by the name of Sandy MacGregor. In time the place had assumed his name.

MacGregor Gap consisted of a good spring, plenty of shade, a continual cool breeze even in the hottest weather, one exceptionally well-stocked saloon, eating and sleeping quarters for two-legged animals, and another for four-legged beasts.

There was a natural stone bench at the top of the rise, and after MacGregor's place became well-established as a resort of questionable import, a keen-eyed watcher sat there with his back to the unyielding rock, a spyglass to his eye.

Three days after the two DZX punchers had headed south on a hunting vacation, the solitary watcher gazed at a dust cloud that approached the foothills. He raised his glass and focused it. Slowly he arose and strolled toward "Sandy's Tavern."

He entered the long, low room and asked: "Anybody here wanna dodge two cattle punchers that look kinda like gunmen?"

"Wher-r-re they fr-r-om, Slim?" demanded MacGregor.

"Richelieu County. Travelin' light. Be here in half uh hour."

Two or three men laughed.

"Dinna fash hersel', Slim, lad. Ye'll be seein' mor-r-e o' the Richelieu puncher-r-rs in th' days to coom, I'm thinkin'."

"Slim" shrugged and returned to his post.

A half-hour later the two horsemen jogged onto the plateau of MacGregor's Gap.

"Have uh peep at th' unfoldin' glories uh th' range, Mr. Matthews," offered Frank. "Observe th' panee-ram-mic vistas uh beauty fadin' into th' distance like yore month's wages over th' tables at Lebanon."

"Not to mention uh sweet view uh th' trail jes' below us," added the other drily. "I reckon they're expectin' us at th' tavern. Make sure yore gun is loose. Let's go an' be received, cowboy."

"One thing," mused Frank, as they rode on to the saloon and tied their horses at the hitching rack, "they ought to know who's gone through here an' who ain't."

They halted in the doorway, the cynosure of all eyes, eyes hard with suspicion.

"Frank," murmured Curly, "if we was on th' road to hell, I'd say this was th' halfway house."

"McQuirey wouldn't of never stopped here," Frank said soberly. "He couldn't of been that tough. Le's moisten up a li'l."

The beetle-browed bartender waddled up and leaned heavily on the bar, leering at them suggestively. He set a bottle and two poorly washed glasses before the pair at a significant motion of Curly's.

Halfway down the bar was a fair-

complexioned, blue-eyed boy perhaps eighteen years of age. His features were almost classical and his hands were slim and girlish. This seeming child in this den of iniquity was known as "the Cherub".

The Cherub was a precocious youngster, being the most deadly and heartless gunman among those present. At the age of ten he had killed his father in return for a thrashing. Since then he had become a young demon with a six-gun. It was rumored that he was a lieutenant of Nightbird and were it not for the extreme youth of himself and the organization he would have shot his way to its head ere now.

AS CURLY set the bottle down and Frank lifted his glass the Cherub strolled easily forward. He halted several paces away from the wary punchers, hands swinging at his sides.

"When strangers come in here it's uh general custom to set 'em up to th' house." he drawled.

Frank turned in surprise. "Why, hullo," he said. "'Scuse me, sonny. I didn't see yuh. Barkeep, yuh got any sody pop for my boy here?"

"Haw!" shouted a delirious soul seated at a table between two windows.

A vivid flush dyed the Cherub's beardless cheeks. Ridicule bit into his soul like acid. It seemed that he merely pointed his hand, so rapidly did he draw and fire, and the hilarious one lurched forward across the rough table, knocking bottles and glasses to the floor.

"Ah!" breathed Curly. "A real live killer!"

The Cherub flashed a burning glance about the room as if daring anyone else to laugh. The youth shoved his gun back into its holster with an effortless flip.

"I surely begs yore pardon, mister," Frank said softly, half-closed lids covering his cold brown eyes.

His life was hanging by a thread, his life and Curly's, he knew; his mind was concentrated on the calloused boy—a soulless killer.

"I begs yore pardon," he repeated. "I sure made uh mistake. Barkeep, trot out uh shot uh carbolic acid for this warm baby."

The Cherub seemed to twitch all over at this deadly insult. Before he could move, a rasping voice came from the far end of the bar and the barkeeper dropped flat on the floor.

"Dinna stir-r-r, Cher-r-rub, or-r ye ar-r-re a dead mon. Bide a wee till yon laddie lays his six-shooter-r-r up on th' bar-r-r."

Curly realized his helplessness with a sinking heart. He was covered by Sandy MacGregor and Frank was at the mercy of that smooth-faced killer. Curly slowly turned his head and met the ugly gaze of MacGregor. He read mockery, utter ruthlessness in the saloonkeeper's hard stare.

It was at this stressful moment that an immaculately dressed stranger stepped upon the threshold. He took in the situation at a glance. At sight of the two rigid punchers a wide smile crossed his lips. He swept his high-crowned sombrero from his head and took a quick step forward, placing himself directly between the motionless killer and the tense cowpunchers.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Eet ees my *buen amigos*, Frank Henson and Curly Matthews. Senores, your frien' Pancho Diaz ees beside heemself wit joy. Nevaire have I seen you seence that gala day een Vera Cruz. You leeve een thees country now, *si?* Your pardon, senores. Thees ees my frien' thee Cherub. He ees thee best an' queeckest shot een thee entire Southwest. Cherub, thees are my frien's, Senores Henson and Matthews. What you do? Haze my frien's? For shame."

Curly relaxed against the bar. The sudden release found him weak. He saw a slim and graceful Mexican—a Mexican he had never seen in his life before.

Frank was undergoing the same bewilderment, but without batting an eye. He radiated pleased surprise.

"Pancho Diaz! Yuh slick rascal, yuh. How glad I am to see yuh!"

"Ah!" The Mexican returned the smile. "Senores, let us dreenk." He linked arms companionably with the Cherub and Frank, pressing up to the bar.

THE BRAZENNESS in introducing two gunfighters to each other just as they were ready to blow each other into eternity, carried over the lethalness in the atmosphere. The Cherub faced the bar reluctantly, but he faced it, and slowly the spellbound denizens in the background came forward.

"Yeah," grunted Curly. "Belly up, men. Th' drinks is on us. Le's all drink carbolic acid. Barkeep, dish up yore strongest he-man poison. Pancho, we thought yuh was still dodgin' th' rurales down in Mexico. Remember that night th' three of us beat up th' police force?"

"*Si, si.* Thee senor has thee very great memory." Diaz laughed reminiscently. He raised his glass. "Senores! A toast to my old frien's here. To all merry hearts and bold hands wheech take that wheech ees not given freely. To all gay dogs, bold lovers, and fierce fighters. To one who ees not wit us een daylight."

"Oh-oh!" murmured Frank. "Nightbird!"

"Shut up an' drink," whispered Curly tersely.

The toast stirred even the smoldering Cherub. Raw spirits trickled down leather-lined gullets. Curly set his glass down and clutched at the bar, fighting for breath.

"Wow!" he finally managed to gasp, and the Cherub smiled disdainfully as he put down his glass without a grimace.

"I reckon we'll be siftin' on back now," said Frank slowly. "Yuh ridin' our way, Pancho?" He knew now that he and Curly would never catch McQuirey north of the Texas line.

"I have thee great sorrow, but I cannot. Perhaps," and Diaz winked broadly, "we weel ride together like before, *si?* Come, I weel go wit you to thee horses."

Sandy MacGregor motioned a couple of men to the dead man at the table. As the two punchers went through the door they saw the Cherub push the unfortunate man's body to the floor and occupy the vacant seat.

Pancho Diaz walked beside their horses to the rock bench where the punchers made as if to pull up their ponies and ask their debonair protector a flood of questions.

"Don't stop, senores," the Mexican forestalled them coldly. "I reesk my life to save you. I must do some *muy pronto* explaining when I go back. Ride fast, ride queeck, and I weel stand here unteel thee night she protects your backs."

"But, say—" began Frank.

"But notheeng, senores," interrupted Diaz shortly. "Eef you owe me thees obligation for my so poor assistance you weel repay me by going now."

"Pancho Diaz!" exploded Frank. "Vera Cruz! Vera Hell! I never seen that dude before in all my whole life put together."

"But yuh was sure glad to see him this evenin'," added Curly. "An' so was I."

"Vera Cruz!" reiterated Frank disgustedly. "Th' only Vera I can remember had red hair an' danced at th' *Bright Star.* Curly, they sure is somethin' fishy 'bout th' whole business. Where'd he come from? From th' Texas side? Naw, he couldn't of jes' arrived. They knowed him. I'm glad he stuck his snoot in when he did an' like he did, but Curly, I betcha that feller is Nightbird!"

13

IT ALWAYS afforded the DZX punchers merriment when Sing Li dressed to go marketing in Lebanon. He invariably wore his loose-fitting jacket of yellow, and an old battered Stetson hat. His soft house

slippers he would regretfully change for rubber overshoes. He topped the attire with an old opera cloak that had been discarded by Montague's wife years before.

On the morning following the visit of the Mexican to Montague, Sing Li surprised the men by appearing before them in his official regalia at breakfast.

"When catchee bleakfas' some good lilly boy hitchee team flo Sing Li?" he asked. "Sing Li fixee good suppee. Velly fine."

The elder Montague had not come down to the chuckhouse for breakfast, Sing Li having served him before donning his formal dress. Jack, rising from the table, turned to eye the yellow man.

"You went to town last week," he commented suspiciously. "What are you going in for today?"

"Havee implotant business. Catchee gleen gloc'lies flo cowboys. Keepee off scluvy. You savvy? Velly fine."

"Now see here," stated Harrison, "if yuh go an' get yore danged hide in some kind of Oriental trouble on top of what's stewin' up now an' we have to come in for yuh, I'll be purty danged mad. *You* savvy?"

"Velly fine." Sing Li smiled blandly. "You want hitchee team?"

"That beats me," said Harrison wearily. "First one and then another has a streak uh insanity. I won't be surprised if I see th' cows flyin' 'round th' treetops by mornin'..."

* * *

The first stop Sing Li made in Lebanon was at Fielding's wholesale Produce Company where he tied his team with an intricate knot.

"Fillum up—cabbage, fluit, gleen stuff," he ordered, and shuffled off down the street.

Going to the courthouse he headed for Judge Ryan's office.

"Why, hello, Sing Li," greeted the legal arbiter of Lebanon. "Sure an' what brings you in to see me? Ye want to import a dozen wives?"

"No, thankee, Judge. Catche plenty tlouble already. Mebbe Judge Lyan want catchee clook who kill station agent Myel?"

"Ye're domn whistlin', me b'y," concurred the judge heartily.

"Velly fine. If Sing Li findee and catchee, you takee?"

"What's goin' on behind them black eyes, I wanta know! Sure, an' I'll slap th' spalpeen in jail so quick 'twill make his head spin."

"Sheliff no letee get away?" queried Sing Li anxiously.

"Not if I get my hands on him," snorted the judge. "What d'ye know, Sing Li?"

"Sing Li fixee. Sing Li pletty well know who killee Missee Myel. Sing Li catchee plenty ploof."

"Just what d'ye mean, exactly?" Judge Ryan leaned forward, studying the placid face.

"Sing Li *know*," explained the Chinaman placidly. "*If* Sing Li light, makee confession. If Sing Li long"—he shrugged—"po' China boy."

"I'm domned!" the judge exclaimed. "Ye've got to walk careful, Sing Li, my b'y... Who is th' man? And how d'ye figure it out?"

"Judge Lyan no wolly. Sing Li plenty soon findee smalt man thinkee allee same Sing Li. Then Sing Li know."

"All right. If ye are so domned smart, go catchee an' I'll take charge o' th' culprit."

"Judge no get angly with Sing Li," soothed the Oriental. "You savvee Missee Caltel? At *Texas Hotel*, at *Mexican Dolla' Saloon*, mebbe."

"Caltel? Oh, ye mean Carter? Is he—"

Sing Li nodded and the judge's mind went back over the past weeks.

"Now Judge Lyan go findee and sittee in back of saloon. Sing Li findee too. Judge Lyan see evelything. Velly fine."

He turned and shuffled out.

"Sure an' I'm domned!" ejaculated the dumfounded judge. "An' since when did ye start takin' orders from a haythen, Michael Ryan?"

THE *MEXICAN DOLLAR* and the *Bright Star* were the only

two saloons solely owned by Horsehead Owens. The *Bright Star* was operated for the elite; the *Mexican Dollar* for the *bourgeois.*

In the *Mexican Dollar* Carter stood at the rear of the bar. There was a quart bottle and a small glass beside him. And he was doing what no gambler should do; he was getting drunk, drinking neat whiskys with the precision of clockwork. He was oblivious to the noise, the raucous laughter. The only things that lived about him were his whisky hand and his eyes.

A weird little figure in battered old hat and antique opera cloak backed into the gambler just as Carter was raising his brimming glass. The liquor spilled down the front of the man's immaculate shirt, the glass shattering on the floor.

Carter reached forward and clutched the clumsy one's cloak collar. His eyes glittered and his slender fingers crooked like talons as he lifted the small figure completely off its feet. A flicker of joy crossed his eyes as he recognized the timid and apologetic features of Sing Li, steward of the DZX Ranch.

"You!" he whispered hoarsely. "You ruined my silk shirt. Damn you, take off your own jacket, wet it and clean my shirt. Quick! D'you hear?"

He assisted by ripping the cloak from the narrow shoulders and flinging it to the floor.

"Missee Caltel 'scuse Sing Li," moaned the frightened little Oriental. "No mean luin clothes. Sing Li buy silk shilt flo Missee Caltel."

"I said to take off that jumper and clean my shirt," hissed Carter. *"Pronto!"*

The other noises of the saloon subsided. A bulky but inconspicuous individual hidden behind his paper at one of the tables quietly put down the news sheet and leaned forward intently.

"No can do—no can do!" wailed the Chinaman. "Sing Li no washee woman. Sing Li velly solly. Missee Caltel 'scuse China boy."

The gambler snatched the old hat from the Oriental's head. Sing Li's long thick braid tumbled down.

"Take off your hat when you address me," snarled Carter furiously. "Now, take off that shirt and get busy."

The Chinaman stood still, wringing his hands together helplessly. The poison of the whisky mingled with the poison at the gambler's heart's core, and desire to hurt, to torture, possessed his soul. With a swift motion he slapped the cringing figure across the face, a stinging blow.

The yellow man straightened and his arms folded across his chest, one hand in each sleeve. An air of dignity mantled him and his black eyes bored into the narrow pools of cruelty in Carter's face.

"To think Sing Li, son of so many honolable ancesto's live to see the day a white dog lay hands on him. White man, you allee same dog and son of dog. You claven clook."

Killer flame leaped high in Carter's eyes. His face drained white.

"Son of pig ancestors," he stated in a hoarse, insulting voice, "you are going to die! Is there anything you want before the buzzards pick your bones and coyotes howl over your dishonorable grave?"

THE MAN had all the advantage and no one knew it better than Sing Li. He had known he would need a white protector, right or wrong, for the gambler would shoot to kill.

Sing Li stared steadily into the exultant eyes before him.

"Yes," he announced clearly, "I want to know *why* you kill the station agent."

Carter's revolver barked and an ugly red streak appeared upon Sing Li's left cheek and blood began to trickle down his face.

His right hand flicked out of his sleeve and pointed in an imperious gesture. The second shot from the gun of the accused gambler never came.

Carter caught at his throat convulsively, clutched at the bar with

one hand. Gurgling horribly, he fell heavily to the sawdust-covered floor. A keen stiletto quivered in the little hollow at the base of his neck.

As realization dawned upon the stunned crowd they set up a roar and surged forward. "Git a rope! Git a rope!"

There was a bull-like bellow, and the bulky figure at the table heaved itself up and sprang forward.

"Not wan single step farther, ye domn spalpeens, or I'll give ye thirty days for riotin'. Sure an' I saw th' whole shebang an' right here an' now I'll pronounce this man not guilty!"

The fiery old Irishman faced the potential mob angrily, his unquestioned authority holding them back. "Sing Li, me b'y," he said, "ye better haul yer freight out to th' ranch an' stay hauled till I make these idjuts see a little reason."

"Missee Caltel wishee speak," rejoined Sing Li imperturbably, pointing down to the dying man.

Judge Ryan knelt over the gambler. He made as if to reach for the knife.

"No—don't pull out," whispered Carter. "It'll drown—me. About Myers—I killed him. Left young Montague's—k n i f e. It—is—big—deal. Whisky—got me. Makes me mean." He ceased, gurgling unpleasantly.

A hairy hand had reached down swiftly and jerked the knife blade from the confessor's throat. Blood gushed forth in a jet. He opened his mouth to speak, and strangled in his own blood.

"Hill's bills an' sivin divils!" roared the judge. "What misbegotten imp grabbed thot knife?"

There was no response. Owens pushed forward.

"Hal Brewer an' Horsehead Owens, ye heard th' dead man's confession," Ryan said aggressively.

Brewer nodded silently. Owens spoke. "Didn't see it all. Carter admitted killing agent, though."

"Then ye seen enough," snapped the judge. "Wid me an' Sing Li here that makes four of us. Don't any o' th' balance o' ye roughnecks ever try to swear any different in my court—if ye want to continue to reside in Lebanon. I guess I'll be goin' wid ye now, Sing Li."

14

A PAIR OF weary cowpunchers r o d e up to the DZX corrals and dispiritedly f l u n g themselves from their saddles.

"Dang, but I'm tired, d u s t y, an' hungry," g r u n t e d Frank. "We been gone five or six days for nothin'. We ain't done anybody any good."

"They's a light up at th' house," said Curly. "Le's see if Mr. Montague feels any different now."

The rancher was alone in the big living room. His eyes lighted up at the appearance of the weary punchers.

"Howdy, boys," he greeted. "Have any luck?"

"Naw," responded Curly disgustedly. "That slim cowpuncher sure musta burned uh hole in th' horizon gittin' away from here."

"Mr. Montague, what we come to see yuh about," began Frank hesitantly, "is why yuh thinks Jack might be guilty uh any such doin's as Carruthers was claimin'. Ain't they anything we can do to prove it to yuh?"

"Who gave you the impression that I considered my son guilty of anything?" asked Montague in a cool, level tone.

"Nobody," gulped the miserable puncher hastily. "But yuh made Jack go on to town with th' sheriff even after he done showed his knife."

"Don't you hotheads realize that if I hadn't done something that there would have been gunplay? Regardless of what we think of Carruthers, we'd have been resisting the law. And why hunt McQuirey? Do you think I'd have kept him if I had thought him guilty?"

Curly squared his jaw. "Well, we didn't see no use in him slippin' off

an leavin' Jack to face th' music."

"I see," grunted Montague. "You boys left too hastily, though; Jack came home the evening you set out. The next day Sing Li went to town and had a clash with Carter, the gambler, and killed him in self-defense. The fellow confessed to the murder just before dying.

"Now you want to know if you can do something. Jack is exonerated and so is McQuirey. Yet, you can help; late this afternoon Jim found three unbranded yearlings out on our range afflicted with blackleg and running with our herds. And I've had a brief note warning that the Lebanon National Bank is to be looted tonight."

"My gosh!" whispered Curly. "We ain't been nowhere an' we ain't seen nothin'.

"You say none of the boys know you have returned?"

They shook their heads.

"Good. Now then, boys, you know what blackleg means if it takes hold in our stock, besides which it will pollute the ground permanently. Somebody may be bringing in more. We've got to stop the trouble before it starts. Tomorrow we will begin to inspect the entire herd. That this is an attempt to wipe out the DZX herd and ruin the ground I do not doubt. We must guard against this and against Nightbird. The rustlers killed one of Perth's punchers in a raid last week. Because of all this we cannot go to Lebanon on the strength of this note which I believe to be a genuine warning. If I send some of the boys they'll all want to go. I can't spare them. Do you get the idea?"

Frank beamed. "Yuh want us to go to town an' see 'bout this bank robbin' business."

"Precisely. Ride straight to Judge Ryan's home and give him this note and a letter I will write, and hold yourselves under his instructions. Don't talk to anyone. If we keep silent we will probably be able to trace this blackleg trouble to certain parties in Lebanon. Don't stop at Blaine's. Jack is there and I don't want him to know anything about this."

THE TWO punchers ate in the living room and wasted no time. In an hour Judge Ryan was reading Montague's letter. He grew apoplectic.

"Hill's bills an' sivin divils!" he ejaculated. "We'll shake together a private possee thot'll make Nightbird sick entirely."

Shortly a conclave of men assembled at the big wholesale house across the street from the bank. Judge Ryan explained the situation, and the men deployed around the dark bank building quickly.

Curly, Frank, the judge, and Klein, the bank president, quietly entered the bank, locking the door behind them. The plan was for the four men within the bank to surprise the looters while the cordon without captured any bandits posted outside and prevented the escape of any in the bank.

Silence fell and the four men settled themselves for a long vigil. Until midnight the uproar from the saloons in the vicinity continued unabated, and the noise of riders and walkers past the bank came to their ears.

Gradually the sounds died away. It must have been three o'clock when a faint tinkle was heard at the back door. Someone was fitting a key into the lock. The tumblers turned smoothly. Startled, President Klein wondered which of his employees could have furnished the burglars with a key.

The straining listeners heard the sound of metal against metal. At length there came the sliding of wood as the bar across the door was lifted.

"The smart devils," thought the bank president. "That is a clever trick—raising the bar with a strip of metal. No wonder they can't catch Nightbird."

A draft of fresh air was felt, then three figures took substantial form.

"Now!" Judge Ryan cried sharply and leveled his gun upon the hazily outlined figures. "Stick 'em up, ye imps o' Satan! Ye're caught!"

The two DZX men sprang forward, guns at the ready.

The three intruders leaped apart

with curses of consternation, firing immediately. A masked figure in a black riding cloak whirled swiftly and sprang for the door. The judge's shotgun roared and a heavy charge of buckshot ruined the oaken barrier as it slammed shut behind the fleeing raider.

Shots sounded from the alley and from the front of the building. There was a thudding of feet, the sharp clattering of hoofs, mingled shouts and cries. Then the sound of horses in rapid gallop.

"Bungled," announced Frank disgustedly, looking down at the man who had not shot at him quickly enough.

Curly cursed artistically as he held his left arm tightly. One of the bandits had shot more true. However, this man had stood somewhat in the line of the judge's buckshot and he also was down.

The rear door was flung open and two men ran in.

"Hill's bills!" bellowed the judge. "Where's th' cavalier o' th' trailin' nightshirt?"

"Damn it, he got away!" howled one of the wild-eyed new arrivals. "He was as quick as uh fox. Ted an' Jawn are chasin' him now. All we got was his ridin' cloak."

The judge almost choked with rage.

"Le's see th' cloak," said Frank quickly.

He and Curly examined the article. Slowly their eyes met. It looked familiar. They had thought it was going to before they examined it.

"Well?" growled Ryan.

"Er—it looked kinda like Sing Li's ole operee cloak," stated Frank. "But I see it ain't."

"Ye're a domn liar," contradicted the judge belligerently. "It don't look remotely like yer yeller opera queen's cloak. Where did ye see this cloak before?"

"Judge, this here bird yuh perforated is still existin'," Curly broke in. "Mebbe he can tell us somethin'. They's somebody beatin' on th' front door an' my arm is bleedin' to beat hell."

KLEIN opened the door and citizens, gamblers and members of the posse poured into the room. Conspicuous among the crowd were Sheriff Carruthers in his shirt sleeves and Jackson, hatless, and with a green eyeshade in one hand.

"What's goin' on here?" thundered Carruthers, shoving his authoritative way forward.

Judge Ryan glared at him. "Ye can see thot we've nipped a bank robbery in th' blossom, Now corral these inquisitive mavericks an' git 'em outa here."

"Kee-rect," agreed the sheriff more mildly.

His eyes fell upon the riding cloak the judge held.

"Look familiar, Mister?" Frank drawled.

"They say Nightbird wears one," Carruthers growled. "Did yuh git him? Where is he?"

"We didn't git him," snapped Ryan irritably. "Now, git out."

As the gathering crowded reluctantly out, Frank bent over the outlaw who had stopped one or more of the judge's slugs. The man's eyelids fluttered weakly. One of the men rolled up the cloak and placed it under the wounded man's head. The bank president brought a glass of water.

Apparently the fellow suffered most severely from a crease on the side of his head. His other wounds appeared to be trifling. He was a stranger—a sandy-haired individual with a stubble of tow-colored hair on his ugly face. He looked more like a disreputable tramp cowpuncher than a bad-man.

Frank winked broadly at the men about him and knelt beside the stricken raider.

"Lay still," he commanded in a low, serious voice. "Yuh're sinkin' fast. Is they anything yuh want to confess to Judge Ryan here 'fore yuh cross th' line?"

A hopeless expression crossed the fellow's face. "I—I'm not a-goin' tuh-tuh die, be I?" he whispered.

"We all gotta go, yuh know," Frank offered sympathetically.

The red-faced judge kneeled beside

the victim, drawing a pencil and an old envelope from his pocket. "Come, tell me anything ye might be wantin' to ease yer soul of before yer strength leaves ye. Was that Nightbird in here with ye?"

The wretched fellow gulped miserably.

"Yessir," he whispered.

"An' what's his real name?"

"I dunno. I ain't never seen him 'thout his mask; none uh us does. I don't wanna die. Don't let me die. My Gawd, I ain't fit to die!"

"There, there," soothed Frank. "They ain't no use hollerin' thataway. We'll do our best for yuh. We done sent for th' doctor. Tell th' judge some more."

"Ye say ye've never seen him?" pursued the judge gently.

"Nawsir," moaned the unhappy victim. "He don't never show up till night an' then he always wears his mask an' cloak."

"Where does he meet ye?"

"He tells us every time where he'll meet us next time. If anything happens we meet up 'round MacGregor's Gap."

"An' ye've no idea atall, atall who Nightbird is?"

"Some uh us thinks he might be one uh his own lieutenants in th' daytime but we don't know nothin' for sure an' it ain't healthy to inquire."

"What lieutenant? Ye've named no lieutenants yet."

"We kinda suspects uh Mex who joined us a couple weeks ago. He wears uh black cloak an' he ain't worked with us at night none yit."

"What's his name?"

"Pancho Diaz."

"How many are there in yer congenial band?" continued the judge boringly.

"I dunno. It's growin' purty fast. Nightbird handles th' whole thing hisself. T'night's th' fust time he ever miscalulated, too."

"Sure an' misfortunes come to us all," consoled Ryan. "So MacGregor Gap is yer lodge room. Where do ye take th' stolen cattle?"

"There's uh place in th' mountings over toward—"

"Here's th' doctor!" bawled Carruthers, striding in.

"Over towards where?" demanded the judge.

But the wounded man's ear, attuned for the welcome footfalls of a medical savior, heard Carruthers.

"Lemme have th' doctor!" he shouted desperately. "Don't lemme die! Help!"

"Hill's bills an' sivin divils!" growled Ryan. "Doc, patch up this buck's scalp wid some stickin' plaster. Carruthers, ye're so domned anxious to work, put handcuffs on this specimen an' take him to jail, domn yer skin!"

15

CLARENCE Higgs, deputy sheriff, had occasional flashes of what he was pleased to call "detectional inspiration." Since his superior demanded the apprehension of the mysterious bondsman for Joseph McQuirey, tramp cowpuncher, Higgs felt that it behooved him to put it to use to locate the elusive gentlemen of the ready cash.

It stood to reason that no man would put up that much money without an excellent reason. Hence, McQuirey must be Nightbird, and the bondsman whose initials were J.M. a confederate. The murder charge was cleared now, though. Why didn't the bondsman come to demand his money? There could be but one reason. The bondsman was scared. Therefore the bondsman must be Nightbird also.

Anyway, the sheriff wanted him. And if Higgs could lay his hands upon him it would mean a distinct ostrich plume in the head covering of Higgs—providing he didn't let sheriff Carruthers confiscate his thunder.

Higgs arrayed the points in his favor before him. Mr. Bondsman had the face of a lean and grim turkey buzzard, and Higgs knew Jed Martin by sight. Sheriff Carruthers didn't.

There remained but one thing to do —go find the man.

With the new zeal which fired Higgs, he found his man the first crack out of the box and proudly returned to Lebanon, his charge riding peacefully along at his side. There was but one insect in Higgs' ointment of bliss. The stranger was entirely too willing and too docile. And he could not be Nightbird; he looked too gawky, too honest.

Higgs had described the man to all he met, and finally had espied the wanted man himself, pitching hay in Blaine's farmyard. Higgs marched proudly into Judge Ryan's office and presented his companion.

"Judge Ryan, this here is Jed Martin, our missin' bondsman. He works for Mr. Blaine, and *I* found him. He didn't know we was huntin' for him or he would have come in before, he says. I'll run down an' git th' sheriff."

When the sheriff entered he looked the gaunt stranger over curiously. "So this is th' mysterious bondsman, eh? Where yuh been all this time?"

The insulting tone made Martin's muscles harden. "I didn't know ye was a-lookin' fer me," he stated quietly. "I been workin' fer Mr. Blaine."

"Humph!" sneered Carruthers. "How long yuh been a mamber uh Nightbird's gang, Martin?"

The Arkansan stiffened. "What d'yuh mean?"

"I'm speakin' 'bout McQuirey. Didja know he has run off an' that yore ten thousand dollars is forfeited?"

"How d'yuh figger th' money is forfeited?" drawled Martin. "He warn't guilty uh th' murder now that this here Carter feller confessed."

"Sure an' that's true," endorsed Judge Ryan.

"But he's suspected o' bein' Nightbird," put in Carruthers viciously. "He's suspected uh robbery an' cattle rustlin', an' there's one death to his credit besides lots uh shootin's. We got yore money an' we're gonna keep it unless yuh can produce McQuirey."

"How can I produce somebody I don't know nothin' 'bout? Yuh can keep th' money. It ain't mine."

Higgs' mouth hung open.

"What?" The exclamation was wrung from the sheriff and the judge.

"'Sfact." Martin was enjoying the consternation.

"Suppose ye tell us th' whole story, Martin," decided Ryan.

THE MOUNTAINEER nodded. "All right. I was sittin' in th' door uh Blaine's barn that day when I looked up an' saw uh masked man in uh black ridin' cloak. 'Fore I could reach fer a pitchfork he says, 'Do yuh want to earn five hundred dollars?' I says, 'Yes.' He pulls out uh big wad uh bills from under his cloak and counts off ten thousand an' five hundred dollars. 'Go to Lebanon right now,' he says, 'an' put up ten thousand dollars as bond fer uh man named McQuirey who is bein' held in jail. Then come straight back here without doin' no talkin' an' th' five hundred dollars is yores.' I couldn't see nothin' wrong in that. So I done it. That's all."

"Can—can yuh describe th' m-masked man?" stuttered Carruthers.

"Waal," drawled Martin meditatively, "he was purty well set-up. He had broad shoulders an' he was quick. He had a black mask over his face I done told yuh."

The sheriff clutched his beard fiercely. "This man is uh liar," he stated.

Martin swung quickly toward him.

"Sheriff or no sheriff, yuh eat them words or—"

"He meant th' party who called on yuh was a liar," threw Higgs quickly. "By leadin' yuh to believe he was Nightbird till McQuirey could git out uh jail—if McQuirey *is* Nightbird."

"Sure an' that's possible," said Ryan. "Did anywan else see th' masked man, Martin?"

"Nope. An' when I come back from town he was gone. I kept still like he said do."

"How long ye been workin' for Blaine?"

"I'd been thar 'bout three days 'fore th' masked man come."

"Ye said yer address was general

delivery at Lebanon," pointed out the judge.

"I didn't know how long I was goin' to stay there," explained Martin.

"Do yuh know anything else?" fiercely demanded Carruthers.

Martin restrained his temper with an effort.

"Nope," he stated. "Nothin' you'd understand. Leastways 'bout this McQuirey-bond-Nightbird-cattle stealin'-murder-Carter business. But ye can be findin' me at Blaine's place till I git th' urge to move on."

* * *

AT THE DZX Ranch that night, Sing Li, Frank, and Curly were at once the admiration and envy of the outfit.

"Lookit th' three pesky misquitos," derided the disgruntled foreman over the supper table. "All swelled up 'bout their rantin' 'round an' Curly nursin' uh scratch on his forearm. I went to town an' couldn't scare up no excitement no place."

"Shucks, Jim." Frank grinned cheerfully. "Yuh're such a bad-man they all shy offa yuh. Yuh're so tough we could make buckskin boot laces outa yore whiskers."

"Aw, shut up," growled Harrison, disgustedly.

"You haven't the biggest complaint to register, Jim," said Jack Montague quietly. "I spent a night in jail and then Sing Li gets my man."

"You two growlers ud kick if yuh was bein' hung," jeered Curly. "C'mon over to the bunkhouse. My arm ain't so nursed I can't deal uh wicked hand uh poker."

"One would think that blood and thunder is your meat and drink," commented the elder Montague. "Didn't you discover three calves that had blackleg in the DZX herd? If we go off adventuring and allow rustlers or Indians to drive off our stock there won't be a job to come back to. Since you boys all crave action, we'll just start night herding in dead earnest tonight. We'll divide into regular shifts."

Groans went up from around the table.

"Now see what yuh bellyachers done," bitterly complained "Sleepy" Stearns, who enjoyed his nightly arrangement with Morpheus.

"Let's see—there are thirty-two of us, able-bodied and healthy," continued Montague. "We start branding next week, and we start shipping our fall market steers right away, too. However, I guess we can makeshift with sixteen hands for a spell. That leaves sixteen of us for night duty. We can take it week and week about. Now—"

The door of the chuckhouse was flung violently open and a hatless, blood-streaked, gaunt stranger staggered in. He glared wildly around.

"Mr. Montague—Jack!" he shouted. "Nightbird jes' raided Blaine's place, fired th' buildin's an' took th' gal! Me an' Hercules has come for help."

Chairs were overturned as excited punchers leaped to their feet. His face white, Jack leaped to the speaker's side, grasped his shoulders tightly.

"Tell it all, Martin!" he commanded.

"'Bout an hour ago, while we was at supper, th' farmhouse was surrounded an' five or six men led by that devil in uh ridin' cloak an' uh black mask come crowdin' into th' room. They grabbed Miss Patty an' as Blaine an' me jumped up th' leader shot Blaine an' one uh them hit me from behind. When I come to they'd locked us an' th' two hired hands up. We got Blaine to bed an' while th' two hands started to save th' stock from th' burnin' outhouses I jumped on Hercules an' hit it straight fer here."

"Which way did the bandits go?" demanded Jack.

"They headed fer th' Canadian."

"Let's go, boys!" cried Jack sharply. "You coming, Dad?"

"You know it, son. But somebody must remain here. Jim, will you see that—"

"Not me—not me," began denying each puncher vehemently.

"Silence, you young fools!" roared the rancher. "You'll all stay here but those I name to go. Jack, Sleepy, Frank, Harry, Pete and Jerry! You boys saddle up and we'll go back with

Martin. Frank, you and Harry will ride on to Lebanon, get the doctor, and notify Judge Ryan and the sheriff. The remainder of you wait for your orders here and be ready to ride."

"Git yore clickers, everybody," added Martin. "She's drizzlin' now an' she's gonna rain pitchforks 'fore mornin'."

"Hell broke loose—uh storm comin' up—an' me with uh bum arm," soliloquized Curly.

16

MIDNIGHT found a big gathering of grim and armed men, all the neighboring ranchers, at the Blaine farm. They looked weird and fantastic in the red glare of the dying fire of what had once been a well-filled barn, a corncrib and sheds. Blaine was still unconscious, but Dr. Sawyer thought there was a chance for the fruit grower.

It was inky black and ugly mutterings and sullen flashes all around the horizon forewarned of the fury of the elements when the rain did come.

"They'll make for Free Ferry on the Canadian River if they are riding west," said Montague. "But Nightbird is as cunning as Satan himself. I suggest we send out two or three posses. Suppose we send a posse straight to Free Ferry, and the rest of us ride out in all directions. Whoever runs across the trail can send back a rider and we can all follow."

"An' lynch 'em on th' spot," gritted Perth, a big, iron-gray man. "When they start on our women I'm for not even givin' 'em a trial."

Martin strolled in, looking like a hero of '76 since the physician had bandaged his head.

"Who wants to go to Free Ferry?" asked Bill Montague.

"I'll be goin' that way," put in Martin, his quiet voice ominous in its calm.

Montague turned to the mountaineer. "No," he said kindly. "You'll do far more good by staying here and assuming charge for Blaine."

"I'll take my gang uh punchers an' make for Free Ferry," stated Perch.

"Good," declared Montague. "You patrol your land and beyond, Spaulding. And you, Rankins. I will ride north with some of the men. With Jack going south, that cuts off the raiders from the east completely."

"Let's ride," suggested Jack grimly and strode out.

On the way back to the ranch Frank repeated the story of his and Curly's adventure at MacGregor Gap at Jack's request. Frank again voiced his suspicion as to the Mexican's complicity.

"A wanton murderer like Nightbird," replied Jack, "wouldn't lift a finger to save two cowpunchers. I'm beginning to have a strong suspicion as to Nightbird's identity after this night's work... Just listen to that thunder! And Patty out in all this."

His companion reached over and squeezed his arm.

"You hold tight, Jack," he said. "We'll get 'em, yuh betcha."

At the ranch they nearly caused an exodus with their news, an exodus which would have been complete despite Montague's instructions had not Harrison quickly named ten men, including himself and Curly, to remain behind, and dared them to make for the corrals.

Just after the others had ridden off the storm broke in all its fury, and the disappointed men consoled themselves with the meager satisfaction that they were not facing the wind-driven rain.

IT WAS LATE the next afternoon when they rode out over the muddy range to round up the herds which had wandered into the draws and coulees for shelter. They made a startling discovery. More than three thousand head of choicest steers had completely disappeared, and the terrific rain had wiped out all traces.

A mind as keen as a whip had planned the entire raid. Blaine's daughter had been abducted and his

buildings fired to draw the DZX punchers and all other cattlemen westward. Then, under cover of the rain, the main band of Nightbird had cut out the best steers of Montague's herd while every puncher available was chasing the decoying vandals.

* * *

The lamps were lit in the great living room of the DZX ranchhouse. More than twenty-four hours had elapsed since the raid on the Blaine homestead. All of the minor posses had returned empty handed and were gathered on the DZX. Perth, upon whom was pinned the last fading hope, had not returned, nor had he been heard from.

The room was crowded with ranchers, citizens, U.S. marshals, punchers, and prospectors. The news of the outrage had spread as rapidly as a prairie fire.

Bill Montague sat with Judge Ryan and Sheriff Carruthers at his desk and looked at hard-eyed cattlemen.

"Boys," he said, "on the surface this looks like a game to recover Blaine's daughter, Patty, and my cattle only. For this I thank you. But in reality it is a showdown between this highly organized gang of crooks and the cattlemen and settlers of this country. It is the decisive clash between Nightbird and us. Are we going to tramp out this evil now or wait until it outgrows us?"

"Now!" came the rumbling growl.

"I wrote to th' Cattlemen's Association uh coupla months ago 'bout this here Nightbird an' his rustlin'," stated a rancher. "They come back uh letter sayin' th' matter would be investigated in due course uh time. As for th' sheriff—he ain't showin' no results either."

Carruthers stood up. "It's true I ain't caught Nightbird," he said. "I been tryin' to git him but I ain't had th' loyal support uh th' big men hereabouts."

"Do you think you deserve loyal support?" demanded Montague. "You've been playing politics with a crooked bunch, and I for one haven't seen fit to cooperate with you. However, if you have anything to say, we'll listen."

"In uh matter like this I do deserve support," declared the sheriff fiercely.

"You've been insisting a man is Nightbird who can't be. McQuirey was in jail or on my ranch too much of the time to have been the man you sought."

"Well, whoever th' raider is, th' thing to do is to catch him," averred the official.

"And I am ready to help," grated Montague. "Most of us have felt the touch of Nightbird's hand and those who haven't will probably have that pleasure later if we do not halt him. What puzzles me is, what do they do with the cattle? The steers completely disappear."

Martin, the Arkansan, entered the crowded room and made his way forward.

"Hello, Martin," greeted Montague. "Have you heard anything from Perth?"

"Yep. Miz Perth come over to take charge uh th' house. That's why I'm ready to ride. She said Perth an' his punchers jes' got back 'thout no luck. They'll be right over here as soon as they eat an' change hosses."

Judge Ryan rapped for attention.

"Sure an' th' identity o' this scalawag they call Nightbird is puzzlin'," stated he. "Iverything points to th' Mexican who is ostentatiously a lieutenant o' Nightbird's. The sheriff seems to favor McQuirey. It might be another party entirely. If anywan can offer any information, now is th' time to talk."

He glared meaningly at Curly.

"Well, men," said Curly, "I ain't sure 'bout nothin', but here goes. Me an' Frank was out lookin' for McQuirey an' at MacGregor's Gap we had uh run-in with th' bunch what roosts up there, an' this Jim Dandy Mexican comes in jes' in time to save our earthly envelopes. He wears uh black ridin' cloak. I never heard uh this Pancho Diaz before, but he made uh toast to Nightbird, an' that cloak at th' bank looked mighty familiar."

"For the love of Gawd," implored Jack Montague, "come to some decision, men, if you want to ride with me! While you argue nobody knows

what might be happening!"

THERE WAS a slight commotion at the door, and Sing Li came into the room, leading a half-grown, raw-boned youth.

"Young man cally message flo Missee Montague," announced the Chinese.

"You have something for me?" said Montague.

"You Mr. Montague hisself?" demanded the lad cautiously.

The rancher smiled. "You carry a message for me?"

"Yessir. Me an' Pa is got uh place down nigh Poplar Grove an' this mornin' 'bout fifty men come 'long drivin' uh million cows. They stopped to git water an' me an' Pa purty nigh pulled th' well dry waterin' 'em. We never coulda watered th' cows. After we got back in th' cabin we found two pieces of paper helt down by uh big gold piece. Pa spelt out thet we was to bring th' folded paper to Mr. Montague hisself uh th' DZX Ranch right away. So here I be."

The boy fished in one of his pockets and brought to light a torn and hastily folded scrap of paper. Montague took it quickly.

"Th' rustlers!" shouted several. "They're headin' southeast."

"Boy," cried Jack, "did you notice whether or not there was a lady with them?"

"Yes, they was," admitted the youth. "They wouldn't let her say nothin' to me an' Pa. An' they wouldn't let us git close at all."

"Here, men," called Montague. "Listen to this!

'Have girl and cattle safe, but punishing beef badly in forced marching. Headed for central stronghold I suspected in Kimish Mountains on Arkansas side. Entrance through narrow valley and gorge called Devil's Cut. Look for Pot and Kettle.'"

"Well," snorted Judge Ryan impatiently, "who is hill wrote it?"

"Uh traitor!" shouted an exultant voice.

"There is no signature, but it is from the same person who forewarned me of the intended bank robbery. That it is reliable I'll take an oath."

"Ah!" ejaculated Carruthers sharply.

"Where an' what in hill is th' Pot an' Kettle?" demanded Ryan.

"Th' Pot an' Kettle is two big stones what look like uh big ole pot an' uh big kettle," spoke up Martin. "They is at th' mouth uh Devil's Cut. Yuh go th'ough Devil's Cut an' come out in uh valley. They's lots uh grazin' ground after yuh once git thar, an' they's a way out to th' south."

"What d'you know about it?" demanded the sheriff.

"It's close to my country," Martin stated simply. "Th' Kimish Mountings is my home."

"How far is Devil's Cut from here?" a cattleman asked.

"Not more'n two hundred mile southeast uh here, I should judge," calculated the Arkansas mountaineer.

"We're ready to go," agreed the elder Montague. "Everybody prepare for a long, grilling ride. Sing Li will supply us with grub to hold us forty-eight hours. If necessary, though, we'll follow them to the Gulf of Mexico!"

17

ONE HOUR later found the troop in the saddle and riding hard. They penetrated deep into the country, fording streams and crossing broken country. They saw the wisdom of having Martin, the mountaineer, to guide the expedition. Dawn found them closer to the mountains.

When they passed out of the rain belt and neared the state line they picked up the first traces of laboring cattle. A dead steer lay at the bottom of a little draw.

"Damn!" swore Harrison.

Montague merely compressed his

lips and glanced at the other grim-jawed cattlemen.

"How about it now, Sheriff?" queried Perth. "D'yuh concede that th' rustlers drove them cows this way?"

"Kee-rect," the sheriff admitted promptly. "An' we're gainin' on th' scoundrels, too."

Before night they were far up in the foothills. Dead steers became more and more numerous.

In the wild and hilly country of the Kimish Mountains they were forced to stop because of the darkness. The only consolation they had was that the bandits would have to halt also or abandon the cattle.

The grilling pace had begun to tell on their mounts and they were slow in hitting a fast gait at the break of dawn. The trail led through a natural rift in the hills, and Martin began to gaze lovingly from left to right. Even Hercules nickered slightly. The two wanderers were home again.

"Yonder's Buck Knob," said Martin pointing to a round summit barely visible through the blue haze. "They's more deer 'round that mounting than yuh can find moonshiners in th' whole range uh hills."

As the calvacade of nearly one hundred men wound up into the hills Martin had just opened his mouth to say something else when the silence of the mountains was shattered by two shots fired so close together as to seem almost one.

"Business is pickin' up," declared Perth, drawing rein. "I guess we're closer to th' rustlers than we 'lowed, Montague."

"Hadn't we better call a halt and send a scout or two ahead, Martin?" Montague asked.

"Not yit," the mountaineer returned. "Them shots was two miles up in th' mountings if they was uh yard. Th' echoin' fools yuh in th' hills."

"Where are we now?"

"Ten mile ahead is th' Pot an' Kettle, but them is sure some mean miles."

"Then how an' why th' hill do th' spalpeens go there?" demanded Judge Ryan irritably.

"They could hold Devil's Cut fer uh long time, plenty long enough fer 'em to rebrand an' rest up th' cattle, then leave out th' south end an' make fer th' lowlands uh south Arkansaw...C'mon. They's a fork in th' trail two or three miles along an' right thar is th' place I wanna hold uh pow-wow."

The posse pushed forward rapidly. At the fork in the trail they found the answer to the revolver shots.

"What's that layin' there in th' trail?" called Perth, pointing with his rifle to an object ahead of them.

"Another steer," gritted Harrison.

"Ye're steer crazy, Jim Harrison," snorted Ryan. "That's a—"

"Man!" several of the vanguard chorused.

THE TROOP pulled up and Frank and Curly sprang to the ground beside the still figure in riding boots that lay face downward. Frank rolled the inert form over.

"Tilby, th' gambler!" exclaimed the surrounding horsemen.

"W-what's that?" Carruthers faltered. "Tilby?"

Frank placed his ear to the gambler's chest.

"He's still alive. Jim, hand me yore flask. Mebbe we can revive him."

The sheriff remained rigid in his saddle, but the two Montagues, the judge, and the DZX foreman quickly dismounted and leaned over the stricken man. Curly poured a peg of raw whisky down the throat of Tilby and Frank gently propped up his head. The gambler's eyelids fluttered and a faint color came back to his lips.

"He's bleedin' to death internally," said Frank soberly.

"Tilby!" called the elder Montague softly.

The man's eyes slowly opened.

"Montague," he whispered. "I told them you'd come a-helling."

"We hardly figured that the Lebanon gamblers were in cahoots with Nightbird," said Montague sadly.

"They're not, all, "whispered Tilby. "The raiding—rustling—robbing—all been done by this gang—a little ways ahead of you. You'll have to clean up MacGregor's Gap—daytime headquarters."

"Patty Blaine?" crisped Jack Montague.

"I warned Owens to stay clear of you," the gambler whispered. "You've got a blazing soul that will consume your enemies. That's how I got mine—the girl. Nightbird—infatuated with her. I objected. The Mexican began—making advances to her. She was frightened. Today—here—I took stand against Nightbird. We fought—I lost. Tried to help, Montague." His pleading eyes swept the face of the ranchman, beseechingly.

"Do I follow you, Tilby," rumbled the judge, "thot th' Mexican is or is not Nightbird?"

"Is not," whispered the gambler.

"Do you know who Nightbird is?" questioned Curly.

"Of course," breathed the gambler. "I was—afraid—McQuirey—Nightbird—" His voice trailed off.

"So McQuirey *is* Nightbird!" cried Carruthers triumphantly.

Tilby's head drooped, and he sagged limply. He was gone.

"It's dangerous to leave a wounded man on th' trail behind yuh," remarked Martin cryptically.

"How far are we from Devil's Cut, Martin?" demanded Jack.

"By follerin' th' rustlers, 'bout eight mile. By goin' this left trail toward th' settlement uh Rocky Ridge an' cuttin' across Backbone at Cinnamon Gap it's all uh seven mile an' th' goin' is turrible. But we kin beat 'em thar."

"The DZX bunch will ride ahead and beat them *through* Devil's Cut," announced Jack decisively. "Let's ride."

"All right," agreed Perth. "We'll trail."

"What are you figuring on doing with them after we bottle them up, Dad?" demanded Jack. "How are we going to get Patty away from them?"

"They will probably surrender," said his father. "In case they don't—"

"They'll wish they had," finished Jack tersely.

"They is uh rift in one wall 'bout halfway down th' gorge," stated Martin. This rift opens on uh big round hole called Devil's Hole an' it sure is bleak. If they's much fightin' th' rustlers'll prob'bly put th' gal in thar."

"Let's go!" cried Harrison.

"I'll be bringin' up th' rear," stated Ryan. "Maggie can say she's tired today an' I'll not be disputin'."

THE TWO posses split and rode rapidly along the diverging forks. The mountain craft of Martin came into evidence as the DZX punchers turned from the trail and rode up Backbone Ride toward Cinnamon Gap. He led them over rocky woodlands that they never could have traversed had not the mountaineer been there to choose a way.

As they passed out of Cinnamon Gap and gazed down on the narrow valley below them, Martin held up his hand for silence as he listened. A faint rumble was audible.

"Waal, we beat 'em here," said Martin. "That canyon opens up into real purty valley where Backbone an' Smoky spread apart agin. We better git thar."

Backbone Ridge continued in nearly a straight line along the second valley. Smoky Ridge drew back and allowed a wider basin at its feet, and its summit seemed smooth in comparison with its wilder and unkempt neighbor.

The DZX riders grouped themselves out of the way of the wildly running steers yet close enough to block the canyon when the last steers had run. The thunder of hoofs swelled and echoed weirdly down the pass.

"Where's Carruthers?" demanded Harrison.

They looked around, startled. The sheriff had disappeared.

"An' Martin!" bawled Curly. "Where's Martin?"

Without a word Jack Montague mounted his horse.

"Where are you going?" demanded his father.

"Don't you realize why Carruthers rode on ahead with us?" replied the son. "As soon as we found Tilby I knew who was the head of this gang. That blackleg stunt was just a clever trick and so was the murder of the station agent—to blind us to the real purpose of robbery and rustling. Who owns the sheriff? Why should Nightbird hate Blaine enough to shoot him and raid his place? What devil is infatuated with my girl? I denounce Horsehead Owens as Nightbird and I'm going after that sheriff before he can lead the bandits out through Cinnamon Gap."

"By Gawd!" breathed Harrison. "No wonder Carruthers was never able to catch Nightbird."

"You're right, son," endorsed Montague. "The puzzle picture is now complete. But it means death to be caught in the canyon by the steers."

"Yep," added Harrison. "Here come th' cows already. Start 'em to millin' an' Devil's Hole will be full uh deviled ham."

* * *

SHERIFF Carruthers had been in a quandary since the determined pursuit had been undertaken. Who had tipped Montague off, sending a note by the Thorston brat? It was the same double dealer who had warned him about the bank business. The identity of this unknown had puzzled Carruthers until the posse had come upon Tilby. Damn Tilby for a white-livered skunk!

Caruthers had been forced to ride like he meant it, and his nervousness and uncertainty had been increasing. When the posse split and he rode ahead with the DZX outfit Carruthers was sick at heart.

Then, as he gaxed down at Devil's Cut, had come inspiration. He realized that the cattle were lost to the rustlers and so was the girl. But he couldn't let the rustlers be captured. They knew too much about him.

There remained but one thing to do. He must drop out of the posse somehow, warn the outlaws of the trap, while the steers blocked the pass of Devil's cut, and direct the bandits out through Cinnamon Gap ahead of the pursuing posse. Whether or not he could resume his duty as sheriff depended on circumstances and luck. Anyway, he had a chance. The other way he had none.

Reasoning thus he dropped slowly to the rear and began riding up the valley, searching feverishly for the spot where the posse had come down Backbone Ridge. At length he found a point which seemed to allow space to ride toward the mountain crest.

Forcing his gasping horse up the incline he made for the thicket which he was certain concealed Cinnamon Gap from below. He had barely gained his objective before the first of the hard-run steers came lumbering into the little valley.

Carruthers dismounted and anxiously waited for the cattle to block the narrow canyon. He would try to warn the rustlers. Failing in this, he could make his way northwest. He had always wanted to go to Montana or Wyoming anyway.

18

THE STEERS—and steers in such a condition as to make a cattleman cry—began milling at the neck of the little valley, shying away from the forbidding cleft. But as the hundred and hundreds pressed forward, filling the valley with a sea of tossing and restless bodies, momentum forced the leaders into the neck of the bottle.

Carruthers breathed his relief. It would be only ten or fifteen minutes before Nightbird and his men came into sight now.

"Uh-huh! Yuh are uh dirty traitor jes' like I figgered, huh?"

Carruthers whirled, stared in anguish up the slope. Leaning calmly against a blackjac pine, his short shotgun pointing toward the sheriff, stood Martin, the mountaineer, who by all rights should be on the other side of Devil's Cut.

Carruthers stared stupidly, as

glazed of eye as a stunned ox.

"Mebbe yuh was jes' comin' up here to keep th' rustlers from gittin' away th'ough Cinnamon Gap?" suggested Martin.

"Kee—kee-rect," stammered the sheriff. Tremulously he struck a match, preparatory to holding it to his cigar.

"Yuy're uh damn pore liar, yuh cattle-running sheriff," stated Martin scornfully.

The guilty man looked up anxiously, one eye on the shotgun. There was a quick flare and Carruthers' beard, his beloved appendage, became a pillar of fire. He yelped and beat fiercely at the stifling flames with frenzied hands. He saved but a remnant of his once luxuriant foliage.

Martin leaned against the bole of a tree as he shook with hearty laughter. The clumsy, pawing sheriff reminded him of a great brown bear raiding a honey tree.

The Arkansan glanced again at the miserable man, and suddenly the laughter died in his throat. A startled, incredulous expression came into his face. He saw a bare spot in the center of the sheriff's receding chin.

"Thompson!" he cried. *"Thompson!"* And the veins corded on his forehead.

"Kee—ristmas!" gasped Carruthers, attempting to hide his scar.

"Thompson," Martin sobbed, "yuh left him layin' thar. He lived for four days 'thout no water even. Yuh made him suffer worse'n I kin make you suffer—an' jes' fer uh team uh hosses!"

"Huh?" demanded Carruthers.

"Yuh *murderer!"* hissed Martin. Yuh killed my brother, Hugh Martin."

"Hugh *Martin?"*. screamed the sheriff. "My Gawd! I thought he said his name was Morgan."

Vivid, raw fear suddenly vitalized his muscles and his revolver seemed to jump from its holster. But the Arkansas mountaineer's gun swung up in a perfect arc. "It's th' same gun, Thompson," he said as he pulled both triggers...

Scarcely had the echo of the shots rolled away when the rustlers were fairly in the valley and peering at both mountains with guns drawn. But nothing was visible. Martin had withdrawn behind the scrubby growth and had taken the riderless horse with him.

IN THE van of the hard-riding gang, upon a horse between a lithe and graceful Mexican and a fair-haired youth of classical features and pale blue eyes, rode Patty Blaine, nearly suffocated by the thick dust despite the silk handkerchief tied over the lower part of her face.

Her features were drawn and wan, her hair was tumbled and she drooped with weariness. But her eyes burned with a steady flame.

Bringing up the rear rode an athletic man who, like the Mexican in the lead, wore a black riding cloak. In addition he was masked by a close-fitting domino.

As the sullen roar of hoofs lessened in the valley a new sound broke upon their ears, the sound of horses' hoofs *behind* them. The cloaked rider with the unslung carbine whirled in his saddle, but he could distinguish nothing.

"We are followed," he called in a penetrating voice. "Through the canyon and deploy, half to left and half to right. Diaz, take charge. Cherub, take care of the girl. Ten men halt at this end of the canyon with me. Ride!"

They thundered in between the Pot and Kettle and Nightbird halted with the men he had ordered to remain. They could see the indistinct forms of their pursuers now and they began firing. The masked man smiled cruelly as he heard the agonized screams of a horse and the hearty curse of a man.

"Start building a barricade here, five of you," he ordered. "The other five fire at anything that moves. We'll hold 'em till doomsday."

The rustlers began hurriedly rolling stones together to block the canyon. Nightbird rode forward.

"Send for me if anything develops," he snarled. "Otherwise you'll

be relieved at midnight."

A sudden outburst of firing from the other end of the gorge startled him and he spurred his horse to a reckless gallop. A panic-stricken bandit came to meet him in a shambling run.

"Nightbird, we're caught!" the man sobbed. "Th' cattle went through th' canyon, but when we was follerin' there was uh bunch uh shots met us. Grant an' three more killed an' one or two wounded They's uh big posse ahead uh us. What'll we do?"

"Fight," snarled his chief, and galloped toward his trapped men.

The Mexican was on his way to meet his superior.

"Senor Nightbird," he said rapidly, "thee canyon, they weel rake eet wit lead from end to end. How about thee rift in thee wall? Where she lead?"

"We'll find out," rejoined Nightbird, and dismounted.

He ran with the Mexican to Devil's Hole. They stumbled into the dark hole and strained their eyes. They made a slow circle of the place, noting several points where they could climb up the sides by exerting strength and agility.

THE *CUL-DE-SAC* was of a peculiar formation. Nature had scooped out a perpendicular and cylindrical hole from the top of the mountain to the floor of the canyon as one would core an apple. The hole was an almost perfect amphitheatre, rather a prison. For the sides were almost vertical, sheer, solid rock.

It was almost night at the bottom of this natural dungeon, but the sinking sun gilded the scrubby growth of bushes around the lip at the top with scarlet fire. Devil's Hole was a fitting name for this barren shaft lost in the mountains.

"What a hellish place," whined Nightbird. "But we can hold it against an army. Only a few can approach at a time. And we can climb out before morning. We've plenty of rope and nerve. And remember, Diaz, we still hold our trump card—the girl. This is phenomenal pursuit, though. I can't understand it. I wonder if Tilby could have had time... Go take command at the Pot and Kettle," he concluded abruptly. "I'll go post several men with the Cherub. When I give the signal, fall back into this rift."

The Mexican slipped quietly out and up the canyon. He found the rear guard in a nervous state, but calmly told them of the calamity which had befallen, subtly suggesting that they would probably have to surrender and that to do so peaceably would count in their favor.

When the eerie whistle of a night bird sounded twice down the gorge they fell back quickly toward the rift. The Mexican grinned as he followed them, listening for any sounds of pursuit.

Small fires of driftwood had been made and tired and hungry men were preparing to eat. Their canteens had been filled at the last-forded stream. Men were busily erecting a barricade across the mouth of the rift out of loose boulders.

Behind one fire close to the wall sat Patty Blaine. She leaned wearily against the hard rock, utterly unmindful of the masked figure that studied her so intently, watching the flickering shadows play across her throat.

Patty hated this man as she had never dreamed she could hate any person. He filled her with loathing. He was vicious, all the way to his black heart, this wanton pistoler of her father and of the one man who had attempted to protect her.

Steadfastly she refused to speak to him, recalling the stunning blow she had received as she had seen her father fall with his face in the bowl of candied sweet potatoes. Something constricted her throat when she thought of this pathetic little touch.

She wondered what Jack had done when he had learned of the outrage. She knew he would scour the country for her, and woe be unto her captors when he got his hands on them.

Her silent scorn stung the naturally egotistic man watching her. He wanted to beat down that dauntless spirit.

"Will you partake of our peasant's fare, charming princess?" he whined in his horribly artificial voice. "I regret we cannot lay before you a sumptuous fare of roast bullock as was my intention."

Patty did not reply.

"Answer me, you stubborn chit!"

She did not move. Angrily he stepped across the fire.

"I've had enough of this foolishness," he snarled. "Now you talk or I'll ram this gun-barrel down your throat."

"Help!" she screamed faintly.

Instantly he clamped a hand across her mouth. She bit down, her teeth cutting into the flesh like a knife.

Nightbird released her with a curse.

"Damn you!" he shrilled. "Ritchie! Come and watch this she-devil until I relieve you. Cherub, hunt for a crevice of some kind where we can put this tigress. Diaz! Take charge at the barricade!"

THE CHERUB found a hole which answered for a cave, out of direct line of fire from the rift. The leader ordered the weary girl to go there and stay there. The uncouth Ritchie sat at the mouth of the opening to guard her. She crouched down, arms wrapped about her knees and thought.

She started violently at the sound of shots from the rift. There was an answering fire from out in the canyon, and from that moment on there was continual rifle and revolver fire, an occasional slug of lead *spatting* dully against the wall.

Men with torches began making the rounds of the pit with Nightbird, carrying ropes, and Patty could distinguish sounds of climbing. But always the men returned to the ground, cursing.

Overstrained, Nature asserted herself. Slowly Patty's head nodded. Her tumbled hair swept forward, forming a veil, and she slept.

* * *

After the first volley fired at the rustlers as they followed the cattle from the mouth of the canyon and the bandits had withdrawn in confusion, the DZX men were afraid to fire in volleys as Patty Blaine might be in range of a stray bullet.

Harrison made a stealthy reconnoiter and found that the rustlers had drawn back into Devil's Cut. The punchers closed in on the mouth of the narrow canyon.

"Now what?" demanded Curly.

"They are corked up in the bottle," said Bill Montague. "We'll wait until we hear from Martin."

"Can they git out?" asked one of the restless punchers.

"Only into Devil's Hole, and you heard Martin describe that."

"I wonder if Carruthers is with 'em," mused Frank.

"If he is, he'll wish he ain't," stated Harrison grimly.

"Where's Jack?" demanded Sleepy Stearns.

"Jack!" called Harrison.

There was no response.

"Jack done slipped off up th' canyon," stated Harrison. "I'm gonna foller an' see what's goin' on."

"Yuh can all foller in thar now," said a voice out of the night. "Th' rustlers is inside uh Devil's Hole an' buildin' uh stone wall at th' rift."

"Martin!" called the ranchman.

"Here I be," stated the Arkansan calmly. "I been watchin' from th' lip uh th' crater. They jes' found uh li'l cave an' put th' gal in there. They're workin' like uh pet coon after bugs in uh corn row, tryin' to find some place whar they can climb out. Yuh kin git close now an' pepper 'em for all yuh're worth. Th' gal won't git hurt none. But I'd advise yuh to do some purty heavy firin' to keep 'em *all* busy till mornin' comes."

"We may have to strike a bargain with them," regretfully said Bill Montague.

"No!" came Jack Montague's voice from the canyon behind them. "There will be no bargaining. Patty is safe, Dad. Have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," said the ranchman quietly.

"If th' gal is safe enough, yuh kin sure git 'em," agreed Martin. "Listen onct while I tell yuh how."

19

PATTY BLAINE came to herself with a start, cold and numb. It was dawn and a thick white mist filled Devil's Hole. The rifle fire continued unabated.

She crawled to the opening of her refuge and peered out. Her outstretched hand rested upon something soft and yielding. A human body!

Instantly a man arose from the opening of her cave and smiled down at her. "Good morning, senorita," he greeted. "Ah, you are cold. Plees take my cloak. I have so many things on my mind I forget. Senor Nightbird has been busy quelling a mysterious mutiny during thee night."

The Mexican removed his cloak and tossed it about her shoulders. This done, he turned his back upon her and seated himself squarely in the mouth of the opening.

Patty reluctantly wrapped the rich cloth about her chilled frame. So Nightbird had been busy subduing a mutiny. Where was Ritche? How long had the Mexican been there, and why?

She studied the back in its short braided jacket. On his right side she observed the slim, graceful handle of the long-barreled pistol in its tied-down holster. On the left was the keen, slender knife in its sheath.

The handle of the gun riveted her attention. Could she creep forward and snatch it? At least she would be armed and not quite so helpless.

Diaz turned his head and smiled pleasantly. "For two days I do not have thee chance to talk wit you," he stated. "But I say to you, don't be 'fraid, senorita. Whatever happen, you stay een here—far back een corner. I theenk much weel happen shortly. Take thees knife so eef you need heem—"

He flipped at the astounded girl's feet the long, keen stiletto.

"Peek eet up—queeck!" he commanded sharply, and she grasped the cold steel weapon and drew it under her cloak.

Patty felt that she had made some kind of an error in her judgment of this man, but just how she was uncertain. What had he meant about something going to happen soon? Were the rustlers going to surrender? Had the mutiny proved successful?

As the fog lifted from the floor of the shaft the Mexican followed its progress appraisingly. When the obscuring vapor of white neared the top of the shaft he smiled a trifle and turned to look expectantly toward Devil's Cut.

Curiously Patty gazed upward. Part of the posse had climbed the mountain during the night and were rimming the lip of the Hole, waiting for the fog to lift!

With her in a crevice out of harm's way the cattlemen could capture every one of Nightbird's gang, holding them with their rifles from above while those out in the canyon could come in and disarm them.

Then her rising hope fell flat. A man came running across the floor of Devil's Hole.

"All right, Diaz," came the Cherub's voice. "Nightbird is signalin' to th' posse to bargain for our freedom. We've gotta play our trump card; bring out th' girl."

The Mexican rose to his feet and faced the youth calmly. Patty clutched the stiletto convulsively.

"Senor Cherub, I am ver' sorry, but eet ees impossible," said Diaz in a soft, regretful voice.

The Cherub was astounded. Then suspicion flared in his pale blue eyes. "Double-crossin', eh?" he drawled. "Now we know who has been tippin' off th' cattlemen. Haul out that damn female where we can shoot her if they try to take us. I'll tend to you later."

"Thee senorita weel remain in thee shelter," replied Diaz. "Teel Nightbird eet ees best he surrender. Look up at the top of thee shaft."

"Cherub!" came the nasal whine of the Nightbird.

The Cherub seemed to twitch only and a .45 appeared in his hand. Patty did not have time to catch her breath before the shot came. Diaz staggered back against the mouth of the cave, but he did not fall. Instead, a startled expression crossed the Cherub's handsome face. He quivered convulsively and crumpled to the ground. Then Patty noticed the Mexican had his gun clamped to his hip. The Cherub had met a faster man.

AS THE cursing bandit chief neared them, a ray of sunlight struck the top of the wall. The fog had lifted.

"Hands up, down there!" bellowed a hearty voice. "Ivery domn wan o' ye is covered!"

There was the crack of a single rifle and the running leader halted and blared upward. The entire rim of the crater was lined with riflemen.

Every rustler grew rigid.

"Drop ivery sign o' guns ye have!" commanded the judge's bellow.

The trapped rustlers obeyed. Blind with fury Nightbird tossed his weapon to the ground and raised his hands.

"Clear over to th' side uh th' pit away from th' hosses," commanded a voice from the rift, and Harrison appeared on the top of the pile of stones.

Sullenly the outlaws moved in the designated direction, Nightbird alone remaining still.

Diaz leaned against the wall, his left arm hanging uselessly at his side. Scarlet began dripping off his fingertips.

A swarm of DZX punchers headed by Jack Montague scrambled over the half-demolished barrier.

"Jack! Jack! Jack!" Patty screamed hysterically.

"Patty, girl!" he cried. "I'm coming!"

"This poor fellow was shot protecting me," babbled Patty. "Oh, how many men are going to be killed?"

The masked rustler leader shot one swift glance at the Mexican. The man stood drunkenly against the wall, his head on his chest, And in his holster was a loaded revolver.

Nightbird leaped across the Cherub's body, clasped the girl tightly in his arm, and swung her before him. He jerked the Mexican's gun from its holster and leveled it across the struggling girl's cheek.

"Damn you, M o n t a g u e!" he shrieked. "I'll get you anyway!"

He pulled the trigger but the desperately fighting girl destroyed his aim. Jack Montague staggered, and felt a hot pain along his ribs.

He was powerless to return the fire because the devil was shielding himself with the girl who was most precious to Jack. And the Mexican was practically unconscious on his feet.

Jack Montague wanted to grasp that throat beneath the black domino and tear out the sinews one by one while the man writhed in agony. He laughed aloud. His eyes burned with an unholy flame and his fingers crooked unconsciously.

"Fire away, Owens!" he exulted. "Because I am coming after you. I'm going to kill you, Owens, with my naked hands."

The bandit crushed the girl's body against him, attempted to draw a careful bead upon the man who approached to inexorably. Once more his weapon barked, and a red crease shot across Montague's temple.

"Five more steps," taunted Jack. "I've got you Owens. I've got you."

He had walked straight into the gun, never swerving. The watchers stood spellbound.

SUDDENLY Patty freed one arm and a knife glinted in her hand. Nightbird gave her a wrench and the stiletto flew from her hand and fell at the feet of Diaz. The Mexican leaned over to pick up the knife, but fell forward on his face as Nightbird pulled the trigger almost against the advancing man's chest.

But the move he had made to disarm the girl had swung him about so three-quarters of his head became visible to the DZX foreman. The grizzled old Indian fighter laid his gun across his left forearm and aimed carefully, breathing a prayer as he pulled the trigger.

Never had Harrison made a pret-

tier shot. His bullet took the bandit just above the ear, and the shock spun the man about so that his last shot against the broad chest of Jack Montague went crosswise, striking the wall.

Jack caught the fainting girl as the bandit dropped to the ground.

Harrison calmly blew the smoke from the barrel of his weapon and glanced at the disarmed rustlers.

"I guess that concludes Nightbird," he said. "All yuh cow runners face about an' cross yore hands behind yuh. Boys, tie 'em up."

Bill Montague ran to the fallen Mexican and propped him up.

"Thee game shee ees played," muttered Diaz. "*Viva la* Deezy X."

"Whisky!" called Montague, and Frank and Curly brought flasks quickly. "McQuirey," urged the ranchman, "take a swig of this. You're worth a thousand dead men yet. Let me congratulate you and thank you."

"McQuirey!" shouted Frank and Curly.

"McQuirey!" bellowed Judge Ryan. "Just who is hill *is* this McQuirey."

"The best detective in the Cattlemen's Association," called Montague.

While the two punchers plugged the hole in McQuirey's shoulder, Montague turned to his son. Jack stood with the girl locked in his embrace, staring stupidly down at the masked man at his feet. He saw nothing but the enemy who had escaped his vengeance.

"Why—why don't he get up and fight?" said Jack thickly.

"The man is dead, Jack," stated his father gently. "Owens is no more.

"*Who?*" murmured McQuirey, lifting his head from Curly's shoulder. "Take a look."

Harrison rolled Nightbird over and ripped the black mask from the dead man's face. The features of Jackson, the Chicago gambler, mutely faced the sky.

"Well, I'll be plumb damned!" swore Harrison.

* * *

TWO HOURS later the posse sat before a great fire at the mouth of Devil's Cut where a steer was rapidly assuming the form of breakfast. The rustlers were tied in pairs and guarded.

Jack had a minor wound in his shoulder, a seared mark on his temple, and on his chest. McQuirey lay in a quickly-fashioned litter surrounded by eager listeners.

"Now what do you want to know?" asked Montague for him.

"Th' whole story," demanded Harrison.

"All right. You see, I had been expecting trouble ever since Jack made that 'peach adjustment with Owens. I sent for McQuirey because I knew we could not handle the troublemakers in Lebanon and rustlers, too. He arrived the night Myers was killed. Jack was in town to meet him—that's how he happened to be in Lebanon that night. McQuirey told him he would show up the next day as a tramp puncher. Jack put him in possession of all the details we had and returned to the ranch.

"McQuirey's initials being the same as Jack's was a coincidence. When he was caught hanging around the station the next morning his reasoning was too acute for Carruthers and so near the truth that he was locked up.

"When he failed to show up on the ranch that morning I sent Martin in to find out why. I had made Martin's acquaintance at Blaine's place. So I had Martin bail McQuirey out and that left the detective free without my appearing in it."

"Then th' story Martin was tellin' after Higgs brought him in—th' story o' a masked man comin' to him in th' farmyard—was a fairy tale, eh?" commented Judge Ryan.

"Yes, Judge, it was," admitted the rancher. "I was beginning to have my suspicions regarding the Lebanon crooks. We weren't sure that Owens and Jackson were implicated in this Nightbird affair, but if they were that story would puzzle them. It threw them in a quandary. They knew that Nightbird didn't bail out McQuirey, and Carruthers went so far as to call Martin a liar."

"But, Bill, why did yuh keep me in th' dark?" asked Harrison reproachfully.

"Forgive me, Jim. I don't know a soul in the world I would trust sooner than you, but nobody knew who McQuirey was except Jack and me. He was joining the rustlers at his first opportunity, either as McQuirey or as someone else, and had they heard the least thing suspicious about him his life wouldn't have been worth a snap."

"Jack went back to town with the posse," cried Frank, "to allow McQuirey plenty uh time to git away an' turn into Pancho Diaz. But why did Nightbird let him wear uh black cloak, too?"

"It protected him," said McQuirey.

"So it was from this same Irish spalpeen was it, Montague, that ye learned o' th' intended bank robbery? An' it was McQuirey, too, who left th' note at Thorstons?"

McQuirey smiled slightly, his white teeth showing faintly behind his little mustachios. "I have thee honair, Senor Judge," he said.

"What scoundrel shot at Jack in Hawkins' Draw?" demanded Perth. "I heard somethin' about that."

"I believe Martin can answer that question," stated Montague softly. "His brother was less fortunate than my son."

"Well, it was a smart trick ye played on me," rumbled Judge Ryan. "Here I run Maggie's legs off goin' out to get ye to make bond an' sweatin' blood for th' b'y an' there ye sat at her desk laughin' up yer sleeve."

"I simply couldn't help it."

"Aw, g'wan wid ye, ye domn hardhead," snorted Ryan.

"But there was a joker in the deck for all of us," pursued Montague. "We mis-guessed Nightbird's identity; he played an awfully smooth game."

"There is but one thing I regret," said McQuirey weakly. "That was Tilby's forlorn attempt to rescue Miss Patty. When he demanded the return of the lady I could do absolutely nothing but sit on my horse and watch him throw his life away."

PATTY Blaine sobbed and buried her face on Jack's shoulder.

"Never you mind, little girl," said Bill Montague gently. "Tilby merely made amends for his past misdeeds. He knew his danger when he made his stand."

"Say, if Jackson was Nightbird all th' time," suddenly put in Judge Ryan, "how could he be robbin' th' Lebanon bank an' then come runnin' in th' front door wid th' crowd at th' same time?"

"As he escaped through the back door he purposely loosened his cloak," said McQuirey. "When the men there shot at him he realized that he was practically cornered, so he left his cloak in their hands and darted across the alley. He tossed his hat aside, hid the silk domino in his pocket and drew forth a green eyeshade. Then he calmly walked into the bank with the crowd."

Jack drew Patty away from the crowd and they strolled out toward the grazing cattle, leaving the sound and feel of bloodshed and violence behind them.

Since being jarred back to sanity by the sudden realization that Nightbird was not the man he thought he hated—Owens—when he looked back and saw the wild beast he had become when he had walked forward with the intention of throttling the bandit with his bare hands, a natural reaction had set in and Jack was sick of strife and bloodshed.

Thanks to Jim Harrison he had safely navigated the waters of blood violence.

Patty raised her clear eyes and looked long into his face. As she read his misery she drew his head down and kissed him on the burning eyelids.

"I have Dad and you," she whispered. "Everything else will clear up like mist in the morning sun."

As she spoke the first shaft of sunlight fell across the valley, gilding the backs of the moving steers a golden brown. A faint whisper of a morning breeze stirred, rushing to greet the new day.

"Patty, sweetheart. I love you," Jack murmured in her ear. "And gee, but I'm hungry."

THE END

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A Present From Lew

by CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, Jr.

Lew Ohrman's holiday greetings to Jay Carter wouldn't be pleasant, for Carter thought Lew was dead, and was ready to marry Lew's girl.

IT WASN'T exactly a warm welcome, the stares of the people of Otter Creek turned on Lew Ohrman that gusty December twenty-fifth when he rode into the town he once had called home.

One man, snow-covered and grinning, began a cheery "Merry Christmas, stranger—" then he had gotten a good look at Lew Ohrman's face. The man stopped, the greeting frozen on his lips.

Lew Ohrman nodded. He was a gruesome sight and he knew it. Nose bent, jaw furrowed in an ugly scar, his left eye a withered socket below a bulbous forehead. And Ohrman's matted hair was streaked with gray.

The rider headed for the large frame church on the left side of the street. His repulsive features, Ohrman thought, served a purpose. He didn't want anyone knowing him until he got to the wedding and revealed himself to the girl and man who believed him dead—Sarah Dorn and Jay Carter who were to be married today.

The strains of the wedding march came from the church as Ohrman reined up. Lew Ohrman's mind flashed back to that morning, six months ago, when his boss, Jay Carter, had ordered him to Goose Canyon to look for strays. The Triangle J C foreman had been in the canyon a scant ten minutes when the cattle stampede surged over him. He'd fallen from his saddle, had been dragged by one leg by his frightened horse across the plain and into the thick forest.

Lew Ohrman had been nursed back to life by a friendly trapper. Only recently had his fogged memory, a blank for those six long months, returned to normal.

by the stampede, had been mistaken

A passing stranger, ground to pulp for Lew Ohrman and buried by the people of Otter Creek.

What fanned the bitterness in Lew Ohrman's heart was the fact that Sarah, to whom he had been engaged, could have forgotten him so easily. That hurt him more than Carter's treacherous act of sending him into the path of the stampede. Jay Carter was a handsome devil; he had desired Sarah for a long time.

Lew Ohrman hadn't died in that stampede, and he had returned tonight to straighten out a few things. Maybe the folks of Otter Creek wouldn't look on Jay and Sarah so favorably after Lew had a little talk with them.

Ohrman pushed open the doors of the church and strode in as the minister was speaking. "We are gathered here, in the sight of God this Christmas day, to join in holy matrimony—"

"Hold it," Lew Ohrman said loudly.

The Congregation turned in their seats. Up front by the lighted Christmas tree, the minister looked questioningly at the lone figure in the aisle.

Jay Carter and Sarah Dorn stared. Lew Ohrman grinned. In two minutes, they would be squirming with shame. Despite his changed features, his horrible deformities, Lew could prove his identity—a certain stirrup-shaped mole on his right shoulder, known to certain people in Otter Creek. All Lew had to do was bare it.

Lew Ohrman opened his mouth to speak.

AT THAT precise moment, a thick beam in the church roof, weakened by termites and the passing years, tore loose from its fastenings and came down squarely upon the pulpit. It bounced from there to the floor, bowling over the candle-lit Christmas tree which took fire immediately. The beam came to rest across the legs of Jay Carter.

The flames from the burning tree licked toward him.

As Sarah Dorn and the minister surged forward, a wall of flame leaped along the front of the church. The intense heat drove them back against the pews.

The congregation scrambled for the exits. Several men made for the firehouse at the end of the street. Others dashed for their homes and available water buckets.

Scowling, Lew Ohrman hurried for the burning pulpit. Carter mustn't die now, before he could be exposed for the murderous rat he was. Pulling his coat up about his face, Ohrman lunged directly into the flames and over to the figure on the floor.

Jay Carter's legs were beneath the beam. Jay's eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily, and there was a red gash in the center of his forehead. Lew Ohrman fought his way through the smoke and heat. Somehow, he reached Carter. He wrapped his arms about the beam and heaved. The beam gave a little, settled. Lew wiped the smoke-haze from his eyes, lifted again. The beam came up from Carter's legs. Ohrman dropped it aside, staggered back to Carter. He dragged the man by the feet through the flames and choking smoke.

He dragged him half-way up the aisle, himself now on fire and burning like a torch.

Lew Ohrman felt the sting and bite of the flames, before the smoke filled his lungs,. He fell to the floor then in a dead faint.

He regained consciousness to discover a doctor and Sarah Dorn working over him. The doctor was saying, "He'll make it, but it's touch and go. Smoke in lungs, badly burned all over. We'll have to get him to the hospital."

Sarah Dorn was bandaging. "I wonder who he is and why he interrupted the ceremony that way?"

Jay Carter called, from a bed in the next room. Lew Ohrman noted that they were in Sarah's house, in the living-room where Lew and Sarah used to sit and talk and plan for the future.

Jay Carter said, "Whoever he is, he's a brave man; he saved my life."

Sarah Dorn nodded. "Amen to that. You know, Jay, somehow he reminds me of Lew. Same build, same kind of voice. Poor Lew. Every time I think of his getting killed—"

"Yes," Jay Carter said, "And all because that kid I sent out to warn Lew got thrown from his pony and reached him too late. The litttle Mex kid who had ridden in from Goose Canyon to tell me about the stampede."

Sarah sighed. "If Lew were alive today, he would understand about our falling in love. He was a square-shooter."

THE MINISTER came in quietly. He saw that Lew's eyes were open now, and he placed a gentle hand on the bandaged arm. Sarah Dorn lowered her beautiful face to Lew's.

"What was it," she said softly, "that you were going to say, in the church just before the fire?"

Lew Ohrman looked at her. He looked at the minister, and at the man on the bed in the other room. Now was his chance to spill it, the truth of his identity, and remind the girl of her solemn promise, of their engagement before the stampede, and now that Lew was back, they could be married. Lew wanted Sarah Dorn now more than ever. And above all, he wanted her to be happy.

Lew Ohrman smiled a little, and he gave a cough.

"Just wanted to say," he murmured, "Merry Christmas."

THE END

Renegade's Boothill Strategy

by Jay Tyler

They were trapped, and their only hope lay in a lobo leader's vanity...

THEY CALLED him "Slow George", because he was a big hulking brute of a man in appearance, with a quiet careful way of talking, and there were those who thought that McClean didn't have much except luck. It was just an accident, they said, that he'd captured Pony Jack Orville, the most-wanted man in the territory next to Wilks, and Wilks' right bower. They talked about fools who'd blundered into positions of authority and come to grief —like Fighting Joe Hooker. Everyone knew how Hooker had made his brags, then led his army, 97,000 strong against Lee's 57,000 at Chancellorsville and suffered the worst defeat ever experienced by the Union forces.

And here was McClean, trapped with three men, separated from his main force of the ranger troop that had ridden in to clean up the Wilks bunch. They'd holed up in a deserted ranch-house when a sudden cloudburst caught them on a scouting foray; the Wilks bunch had caught them there and three had been left behind, riddled with lead, in the burning house when they escaped on foot.

"We should of brought the whole troop," growled Banville, who had expected to get command of the post when old Pearson retired. "Instead of which, that dang fool comes out with a handful. Wilks is smart; he's got his bunch organized just like an army, and he knows something about strategy, too. He scouted us out, caught us neat without losin' a man so far's I can see. Then, instead of rushin' us, he burns us out and lets us escape, instead of takin' any chances on losin' some of his crew. Only we ain't escaped; we're here in the woods, just in a danged rat-trap."

"Yeah," said Muley White, a wizened, wire-tough veteran of two wars. "It's most as bad as it was down t' Panama in '52."

"Wilks was a military man, once, wasn't he?" asked Bob Halley. Of the three, he seemed to be the least worried; he'd been too young to serve in the war between the states, and the rangers offered something of the excitement he'd figured that he had missed. Cocky youngster; if he lived, maybe he'd get over this all being an adventure and see it for the grim job it was.

"Sort of," replied Muley. White bit off a corner of his plug and passed it around. "Yuh might say he had sort of difficulty in decidin' which side he was on. Hear tell his paw was in the army of th' republic, and his maw was a Southern gal. Wal, he organized a sort of unofficial corps out in Kansas and they fit a war o' their own, roamin' around th' states. When they come on a bunch o' Union men, smaller'n them, Wilks would remember his maw's heart was with thuh Secesh an' attack 'em and take what was t'be taken; if'n they come across some Rebs who looked like easy pickin's, then Wilks' Northern blood would boil up. They'd slip intuh small towns an' settlements, an' learn where th' sympathies of them as had money lay, then decide which side they was on accordin'."

"And he got away with it?" asked Halley.

"Fer a spell. Made a mistake one night, an' tackled too big an outfit; lost most of his men, an' th' rest was captured an' hung proper. But Wilks himself got away, an' come out here t'operate on a bigger scale."

They looked up as Slow George came up and sprawled out against a tree across from them. The wood offered a fair amount of protection now

but come daylight and Wilks would attack again; their supplies would run out, ammunition dissipate, and that would end it.

"Yeah," said Banville. "We'll be heroes."

McClean pushed his hat back on his head, and rolled a cigaret. "It's bad, men," he said slowly. There was a pained look on his face, and they couldn't know that he was thinking of Samuels and the others who'd fallen in the ambush and castigating himself bitterly; nor could they know that he'd relied on information about Wilks' whereabouts supplied by townspeople secretly in league with the renegades.

"Well, cap'n," said Banville sarcastically accenting the rank of his superior, "what do we do now?"

"If'n it was the Rebs, we could surrender," opined Muley. "But Wilks wants t'wipe us out."

McClean shook his head. "He would like to do that. But don't forget that Wilks considers himself a military man. He has vanity...it would be a feather in his cap to capture the remains of a troop sent out after him. And he wants to get the Corey bunch to join forces with him; it would make a good talking point."

"Maybe when it gets dark, sir—three, four hours—we can slip out," suggested Halley.

McClean shook his head. "I have already considered that. No, men; if I believed there were a chance, I would propose just that. But Wilks has prepared for that; it is exactly what he wants us to do." McClean lighted a cigaret, and Muley's eyes narrowed. "Cap'n, are yuh crazy, man; that makes a target..."

"I want them to know where we are, White. As I said, Wilks would like to capture us alive—furthermore, he wants to do it without any casualties, if possible. Another coup for him, if he can do it." He drew a deep breath. "Our chances are pretty small, men; we can afford to gamble."

A voice came to them from beyond the line of trees. "Hey, McClean—are yuh in there?"

BANVILLE reached for his sharps, but McClean snapped, "No! No shooting now."

"We can pick off that son," growled Banville.

"Put the gun down," commanded Slow George; their eyes met for a moment and locked. There was something about McClean that made a man hesitate, Banville found. He put the rifle down, muttering to himself.

Slow George called out, "Who's there?"

"Cantrell," came the answer. "I'm here tuh parley with yuh. Yuh're surrounded, McClean; yuh might as well give in."

"Flag of truce?" Slow George called out.

"Yeah, truce. We won't start nothin' unless yuh do. And yuh better not try anythin'."

McClean arose. "Watch sharp," he said. "I'm going out to parley; I'll be back." He made his way through the trees, out of their sight.

Halley waited until he had gone, then whispered. "Maybe one of us could get through to the troop, and bring back the troop. The bluff's on the other side of this wood, an' it could be scaled at night. Wilks might not know about that old trail that leads to it."

"We oughter move back t'thuh rocks," Muley said. "Just as good protection than this, an' we could make a fire."

Banville growled. "The danged fool. Should have brought the whole outfit instead of letting them stay behind while we reconnoitered." He broke off as a faint sound tokened McClean's return. There was a wan smile on the big man's face.

"We're moving back to the rocks, men," he said simply.

"What did Wilks offer, sir," asked Halley.

"We can be prisoners of war," Slow George told them. "That is, if you want to trust Wilks' word. We can turn coat, if we want, and save our skins. I rejected the terms and called on him to surrender."

Banville's mouth dropped open for a moment, then he clamped it shut.

He stared at Slow George for a moment, then cheered sarcastically. "Yeah, or we'll blast him with artillery—sure. He c'n see the cannon lookin' out on him from all sides. An' we outnumber him, all four of us."

"He don't know how many of us there are," Muley injected. "He knows he got some of us, an' he knows the rest of us are around. It was rainin' like all git-out when we retreated, an' his men couldn't see no better than we could."

Halley grinned. "Bet he's plenty mad when your message gets back to him, cap'n."

McClean nodded. "I'm not too dang proud to admit when I'm wrong; we were fooled by the folks in town who told us where Wilks was. But some of the information was sound enough. Wilks' bunch isn't much larger than the troop, maybe not as large. We can't be sure about that. But we do know that Wilks is a vain man, and he has a quick temper; I am counting on him to lose his best judgment when he hears that we will not surrender. And my message will spur him on."

"You mean you want him to attack us—now?"

"He will think we have something up our sleeves, but he will think we are bluffing, too. My guess is that he'll forget about being cautious, and send the whole bunch in after us. If we can hold them off until one man gets through to the troop..."

"But you said there was no chance of that, cap'n," protested Halley.

Slow George nodded. "I don't believe there is any chance of *all* of us slipping out. But one man might do it, while the rest of us create a diversion."

"Bring the boys up over the bluff, huh?"

Slow George shook his head. "One of us will go down over the bluff, and get a horse from the hoeman by the creek. Then..." He spoke quietly, but even Banville's sullen disposition lightened as he continued. "Yeah", Banville said, with grudging admiration. "That might work, cap'n."

GREGORY WILKS chewed on a dry cigar and rubbed the shoulder of the faded and grimy Confederate tunic he always wore. He saw no discrepancy between the remnants of a Rebel uniform on his back, and a conscious imitation of some of the mannerisms of Grant. No one informed him of it; what they said behind his back was one thing, but when the boss was around, Wilks' bunch exuded admiration. Those who didn't somehow managed to stop bullets during a sortie, or find themselves in the hands of the law—if they weren't court-martialed. The rest played along and found the pickings good; Wilks was not a leader to risk his men on picayune raids.

And in justice to those who didn't think much of Slow George McClean, it should be mentioned that Pony Jack Orville had been somewhat indiscreet shortly before his capture.

The renegade chief turned to Orville's successor. "Yuh dang fool. Didn't I tell yuh t'grab their hosses, first thing?"

Cantrell knew better than to protest that he had executed this order to the letter, that he'd detailed three of the attackers to corral the rangers' mounts while the rest held them in the ranch-house. "Reckon I made uh mistake," he allowed. "Thought fer sure that we got 'em all."

"Mistakes," snapped Wilks; "mistakes are for dim-wits like McClean; hombres who ride with me can't afford 'em." He picked up the bottle of whisky by his side and tilted back his throat. "Dry work, plannin' a campaign. ...Well, maybe yuh did thuh best yuh could, under thuh circumstances. Yuh done pretty good, so far, Cantrell—but I'm warnin' yuh now, there better not be any more slip-ups. ...So McClean wants us tuh surrender peaceful, huh?"

Cantrell grinned. "Yeah, boss,

that's what he says. Ain't yuh scared?"

"Shakin' in my boots." That was one thing about Wilks; a man could crack a joke with him once in a while, if it wasn't on the boss himself. "Think I'll take him up on that, Cantrell. Yeah, we'll all go in an' give ourselves up. Of course, we may get absent-minded, an' give him lead-poisonin' before we recollect what we come for."

He looked around the fire where the others were sprawled. "Where's yer scout, Cantrell?"

"Ought tuh be back pretty soon. ...Sure, here he comes now." A thin, balding man made his way up to the pair. "They're back in the rocks," he drawled. "Got a fire goin' so's we'll know their right address."

Wilk's eyes narrowed. "Tryin' t' signal the rest of the bunch is more like it. Still, it's what yuh'd expect of McClean, givin' his position away like that." He turned to his segundo. "Round up thuh boys."

Cantrell about-faced and whistled shrilly. Those around the fire stood up and came forward, farther ones signalling to outliers. Wilks drew a map on the ground with a stick.

"Here's how she lays," he said, indicating a roughly triangular area. "The wood is here before us." He pointed to the base of the design. "Beyond them is thuh rocks, where those dang fools are at—and up there" he indicated the apex, "is thuh bluff. Danged narrow—not more'n twenty feet I'd say—and a tough climb to thuh bottom in thuh dark. Yuh posted guards at thuh bottom, didn't yuh?"

Cantrell nodded.

"All right, then. We split. You, Cantrell, take yore party around t' thuh right, along thuh trail t' thuh bottom. Ought t' take yuh about twenty-thirty minutes. Then yuh climb thuh bluff an' hit 'em from that end. They'll be below yuh in thuh rocks. Don't open fire soon's yuh get there; slip down until yuh're well covered. An' if yuh don't hear us, wait until yuh do. Leave thuh guards there at thuh bottom just in case.

"I'll take the rest through the woods and hit 'em from the other sides. It ought t' be about an hour before we start thuh shootin', but we won't wait when we're in position. So if yuh hear us firin' while yore still on yore way up, look out fer them tryin' t' make their way down. They'll have a slight advantage bein' above yuh, if they start down while yore climbin', but it'll be tougher tryin' tuh fight on thuh way down than on the way up. Everythin' clear?"

Cantrell nodded.

THEY WERE all men who knew how to move quietly. They made their way through the woods, and only an Indian, or a trained Indian fighter would have known they were coming. The day had been dark, rain-filled, but now the skies above them were nearly clear, the moon hidden behind a few wisps of cloud.

A short way now, and they'd be through the woods, starting up the rocks that lay between them and the bluff. Wilks moved at the head of the party, the others spread out. He came out of the wood and looked up.

And cursed.

Instead of the single fire he expected to see, there were a dozen small fires scattered over the area. Damn that fool Cantrell; he'd let a man escape and bring the rest of the troop!

Then reason began to assert itself. They couldn't all be holed up there. It didn't make sense. He hooted low to the man nearest of him; an instant later, another subdued hoot came back to him, and Gentry made his way over to the leader.

"Pass thuh word along. Tell the boys not tuh worry; this is only a trick. They built a lot of fires tuh make us think they got a whole troop up there. Can't be more'n five or six of 'em, nohow."

He turned his eyes to the fires again, then shook his head in unbelief. *There were fires at the top*

of the bluff, too! Then—Cantrell and his forces would be climbing up to a trap. No, that wasn't possible; McClean couldn't have the force to pull anything like that.

He drew his sixgun and snapped a shot up at one of the fires, the signal to start. They wouldn't all open fire yet; distances were too far, and there were no targets. But if he could draw McClean's fire now, it would be so much ammunition wasted on the part of the defenders, and their supply could not be other than short.

They inched forward, crawling along, using every upcropping of rock and boulder for cover. More shots were coming from above; Wilks noted the directions, counted. He smiled as a thought came to him; sooner or later, McClean's men would have to move up. And when they did, they'd find themselves pushed back into the lighted area at the blufftop—it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Silence again as they made their way along, then another scatteration of shots came from the rocks above them. Now the bunch were beginning to return fire at the position of the gun-flashes. McClean's men were staying put; the second burst of fire had come from the same spots as the first.

They would be in range now. Wilks fired three times in succession, then ducked low behind a boulder. That was the signal for cutting loose.

There was no answering volley from above. One—two—three—four—he grinned. They were shooting in some sort of sequence. Might as well throw down maps of exactly where they stood. He peered around his cover, and the cigar fell from his mouth.

McClean was conserving his ammunition, all right. But flashes from a dozen different places were opening up now. He ducked as a bullet zinged by his head. Wilks whistled loudly and ducked back again. That was the signal to go slow.

AN HOUR later, Wilks was ready to admit that McClean was less the fool than he seemed, and was planning a court-martial for Cantrell. What in hell had happened to the man? The rangers had maintained a sporadic fire, just enough to keep the attackers moving slowly. It was useless, of course; when daylight came, superior numbers would tell. But just the same, Wilks was chagrined, and he was not a man to take to chagrin pleasantly. McClean would pay for this nonsense.

He called softly to Gentry, who was now close by, and the man started to come over slowly. Suddenly, Gentry stiffened and Wilks heard the sound of a shot. Gentry tried to lift his gun, but it fell out of his fingers. And Wilks realized in that moment that the shot had come from behind.

Now the firing above resumed again, and he could see gun-flashes from below his forces. And in another moment, it was clear that the defenders were beginning to move down.

Anyone could see what had happened; the ranger troop had been contacted, was here and attacking them from below. McClean and his party were attacking from above. Cantrell must have been trapped at the foot of the bluff.

It was a shock that divested Wilks of the generalship he had; had he continued to use his head, he might have had a chance. But his vanity had been struck a mortal blow, and his common sense dissolved in a flood of sheer rage. He damned Cantrell and damned McClean. "I'll get yuh, Slow George," he snarled over the remains of Gentry. Not that he cared about Gentry, of course.

DAYLIGHT found those of the renegades who survived fighting like lone wolves, each man for himself. Wilks had stopped firing some time back; he'd save his bullets for where they'd do the most good.

Sixguns still popped around him as he waited by his cover. He heard McClean's voice call out, "Wilks—you're surrounded. Better give up." The hell with answering. Let the rangers think they'd gotten him.

Over to his left, the balding scout stood up with lifted hands. "I surrender," he hollered. Wilks cursed and raised his gun, fired twice rapidly. The man sagged in the middle then sank down slowly. "No one is giving up," he shouted, forgetting his resolve of a moment before. "We'll fight yuh until thuh summer's gone."

Someone called out, "It's no use, boss. They got us cornered." Wilks snapped a shot in the direction of the voice.

He had forgotten his earlier lampooning of McClean for advertising one's position. And he'd forgotten, too, what happens when a lobo leader loses control.

A familiar voice said, "Wilks!" He turned to see the balding scout levelling a six-gun at him. "This is for Baldy, Wilks; he was my pardner."

The man Wilks had been the night before would have burned down the other before he could finish his speech, but Wilks was no longer the man he had been. He stared at the other, blinked, then started to lift his gun as the import of the speech came through to him. His finger was tightening on the trigger as he felt a hammerlike blow in his chest. Suddenly, the gun in his hand was heavier than he ever imagined a six-gun could be. He put forth his other hand to try to lift the gun up, but a numbing blow on his wrist spun the hand away. He was still trying to squeeze the trigger when the daylight went out of the sky above him.

BANVILLE HAD resented McClean appointment to the position he felt was due him, but he showed his worthiness for command in the whole-hearted appreciation of his chief that filled him. "Cripes, cap'n," he murmured, "the next gent who calls yuh Slow George has tuh answer tuh me personal."

McClean smiled sadly as he looked down on the mortal remnants of Gregory Wilks. "I was lucky," he said. He lifted his hand as the other started to protest.

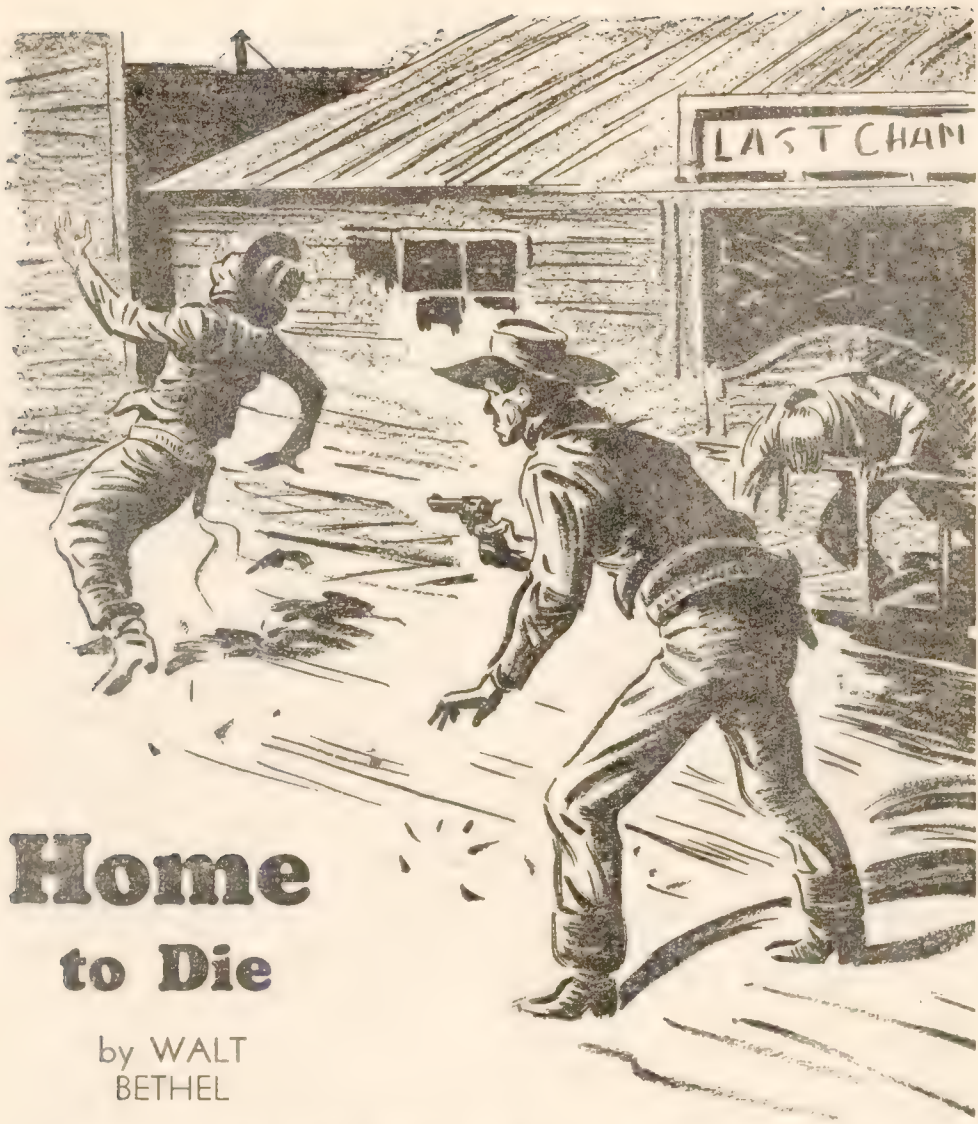
"I repeat, Banville, that I was lucky. Yes, the plan was a good one, but only fortune made it work out. We had one chance and one only—to gain time. That was why we moved up to the rocks and built as many fires as we could possibly handle, moving from one to another, and taking a single shot at Wilks' men as we fed them.

"And that was why I had a couple of fires on the blufftop, with Muley there to pick off any men who came up. Luck. Had all of Cantrell's party made it up the bluffside, it would have been all over; I counted on an attack from below, and an attack from behind Wilks' force coming in time to prevent the renegades joining. Had they done so, we wouldn't be here now."

He turned to Halley. "And everything depended on your getting t h r o u g h, youngster. Congratulations." He shook hands with the recruit, and slapped the other two on the shoulders.

"You see, when I called on Wilks to surrender, he took it as an empty gesture—which it was. But just the same, there was a small edge of doubt in his mind. His vanity made him attack at once, instead of waiting and simply keeping us from escaping, as he could have done easily. And when he saw the fires, and found shots coming at him from a dozen different directions, t h a t doubt began to grow. It might be a trick, and then we might actually have more men than he had thought. And Wilks wanted to make a grand-slam coup, wanted to boast that he had wiped us out without losing a single man.

"Somehow, men, vanity and good fortune don't stay together very long."



Home to Die

by WALT BETHEL

"Climb on your horse, Renwick, and ride down the street. Ride back up it again, and you die!"

CHUCK RENWICK rode slowly up the muddy main street in Renwick. The sun was a flattened red ball in the west. In an hour it would sink below the top of Bald Mountain. Renwick's mount slogged tiredly along in the middle of the street. The rider slouched in the saddle but his grey eyes were narrowed, his glance swept the fronts of the buildings on each side. He wore a slicker, but it was open in front. The scratched stock of a .44 carbine poked its head from the scabbard of his right knee. His holstered six-shooter, of the same caliber was pushed forward on his leg, its handle tilted back for a fast draw. Five years ago, Renwick had ridden down the same muddy street. Ringing in his ears then were the harsh words of Lon Craig:

"Climb on your horse, Renwick, and ride down the street. Ride back up it again, and you die!"

Lon Craig was the only law there was in the town of Renwick. Three days before, Chuck and his brother Roy had seen their father hauled up to boothill and buried in a water-soaked grave. Tobe Mason and his wolf-pup son, Frank had killed Henry Renwick, founder of the town that bore his name. His body was riddled with buckshot. The wound was in his left side. Renwick was blind in the left eye.

After the funeral, the Renwick boys went to the sheriff. Roy asked him to arrest the killers. Craig's black eyes had slitted and a sneer twisted his scarred face to one side.

"They killed him all right," he said, "but Renwick had it comin' to him. I heard him threaten 'em, here in the Antler. He was caught, dead to rights sneakin' up behind Tobe at the bank. He had a gun in his hand. Frank let him have it. He's paid for. Now you'd better forget it and skip town."

Roy Renwick had been twenty-one then, and hot headed. He didn't mince any words with Lon Craig.

"You're a liar, Craig—and you know it. Our dad was murdered—so Mason could get his hands on the *Bar R*, and our store building in town. Mason held a mortgage for Ten Thousand—on everything. It's worth twenty times that. The mortgage is due today. Dad had the money on him to pay it off. They found it out before he got back to town with it. They got the money—and they will try to take the property. Now either you arrest them for murder—or I'll take care of things myself."

Roy didn't have a gun on him. Craig slapped him across the face. When Roy squared off to swing a right at him, Craig pulled his six-shooter.

"Git out!" His voice rasped like the deadly looping strike of a sidewinder. "Take two saddle hosses, and nothin' else from the *Bar R*. Be gone from the ranch by mornin'. Mason's takin' over tomorrow. He told me to let you boys pick out a hoss apiece and take your saddles. And he's only *givin'* them to you. You'd better pick good hosses—and ride fast—one way—git!"

THAT NIGHT, Roy Renwick went gunning for the Masons. He killed Frank and winged Tobe. It would have been better if Lon Craig had killed Roy, but he didn't. He gutshot him, and then jailed him for the night. Tom Wilson, manager of the store wanted to get a doctor for Roy. Craig wouldn't let him. Next afternoon—just about an hour before sundown—he hanged him to a beam under the porch of the store that bore the sign: *Henry Renwick and Sons, General Merchandise*. He wouldn't even allow Wilson and Chuck Renwick to cut Roy down and bury him. He had a good horse standing by the *Antler* saloon. It was saddled and bridled. There was a blanket roll behind the cantle of the saddle. He pointed to the horse and his face twisted down in a sneer.

"Climb on your horse, Renwick," he said, "and ride down the street. Ride back up it again, and you die—maybe like *that*."

He pointed to the figure that swayed like a pendulum, to and fro in the draft under the porch. Roy's eyes were open and staring. His face was contorted. Chuck climbed onto the horse stiffly. Hot tears scalded his eyes. He blinked them back and turned the horse into the street. He rode close to Craig and leaned over.

"I'll be back," he said, "to hang you to the same beam—if you haven't been killed first."

And now he was back. He was twenty-one, the age Roy had been. He knew that he looked more than thirty now. Chuck Renwick had traveled a long, hard trail in the five years that had passed since he left Renwick. The sixteen year old button had ridden out of town with hot tears in his eyes and grief in his heart—and maybe a little bit of fear in him too. He was back, with

hot flames in his eyes—and the sorrow had been dulled by time—but there was no fear in him now. Only the fierce thought of revenge, swift and certain, keened his peering eyes and steadied the hand on his saddle horn, above his guns.

There was little chance that Lon Craig, or anyone else in Renwick would know him. This was as he wanted it—an entire surprise was part of his plan. But even if he was recognized, there was no one in Renwick who could know that he was Gila Slim, reputed to be one of the deadliest gunswifts in all the southwest. The round faced, chubby boy of five years ago had become a tall, slender and slightly stooped man. His legs were bowed by countless days and nights in the saddle. His smooth, boyish hands had hardened, the fingers were slender and tapering. They were roughened by work and the searing slide of a rope. But they were supple, and fast as the darting strike of a rattler.

GILA SLIM always rode within the law—but sometimes he skirted the thin edge of it. Six men had gone down under the weight of lead from the smoking muzzle of his walnut handled .44. Four of them had been owlhoots, better killed than living, and no questions asked. Two had worn badges which said they were the Law. Gila Slim had first proven they were fit only to die—and then had beaten them to the draw. He had worn a law badge in a dozen tough towns and shot them into tamed submission. Then he had ridden on to find a new town that needed to have somebody killed. Now he had gained the experience and trained the hand that he knew he needed to settle his score with Lon Craig and Tobe Mason. He rode up the main street of Renwick, looking for Craig first.

The street was deserted. Apparently everyone had been driven inside by the cold rain that had stopped an hour ago. He passed the Antler saloon. It looked weathered and run-down. Mason's name was still on the rusty sign over the door. The store across the street looked seedy too. It didn't look like it had been painted in five years. The old sign that Renwick remembered was gone. There was a new signboard over the porch. It read: *Tobias Mason, Hardware and General Merchandise. Tom Wilson, Manager.* Mason's name was still on the window of the bank next door, too.

Chuck Renwick kneed his horse around and stopped in front of the store. He climbed down stiffly and stomped his feet to put the blood back into his legs. He swung his arms, and worked his fingers too, to limber them. He did not tie his horse to the hitchrack but left the bridle reins trailing. Slowly, he climbed the three steps at the end of the porch. He shivered when he went under the beam where he had seen Roy Renwick hanging.

Tom Wilson was at the battered old desk behind the counter—it had belonged to Henry Renwick. He looked up when the door closed behind Chuck. He had aged ten years in five. His face was sallow, seamed and drawn. The black alpaca coat hung on his thin shoulders like a sack. His hair was snowy white and stringy. His eyes were sunken and dead. When he spoke, his voice was weak and quavery.

"Just a minute, stranger—my gal will wait on you. Janie."

CHUCK remembered the scrawny, spindle-legged girl that had been Janie Wilson. Her spiraling curls that hung like coppery corkscrews around her thin face. Her big, wondering blue eyes. And her shy, retiring way. She was a year younger than he. Frank Mason had always picked on her in school. Chuck had stood up for her, twice. Frank had thrashed him both times. And in turn Roy had whaled the hell out of Frank. Janie had thought a lot more of Roy than she did of Chuck.

She came to the counter now. Chuck's eyes widened. This was not Janie Wilson! The girl was almost as tall as he. Her face was full and

deeply tanned. There were dimples in her cheeks. She smiled and her red lips parted to show dazzling white teeth in a very small mouth. There was a Vee of firm, tanned flesh at her throat. Her shoulders were square, her arms plump. He recalled that her voice had been shrill and piping—now it was soft, and low.

"What can we do for you?" she asked. Chuck swallowed hard.

"Well—first, I want some shells for my gun—it's a .44—and then—" She started back from the counter. Her hand flew to her throat. She stood for a moment looking at him. Her bosom rose and fell rapidly. Then she leaned forward again, close to the counter. Now her voice was almost a whisper.

"Chuck Renwick! What are *you* doing here? They'll kill you before morning."

Her voice had raised. Tom Wilson heard it. He got up from the desk and held onto its edge, swaying. His eyes were wild. He panted and clawed with both hands at the desk.

"Good Lord, boy, you can't stay here. Get out of town quick. Lon Craig is looking for you to get in tomorrow."

Renwick's hand tensed on the butt of his gun. His lips tightened over his teeth. He turned with his side to the counter so he could watch the door. A chill prickle started at the base of his spine and raced up his back—his surprise hadn't worked, after all!

"How did they find out I was coming?" he asked. Janie answered him: "Things haven't been going so good for Sheriff Craig and Mason, lately. Too many people are finding them out. They are partners now, you see. They've been bringing in gunmen to build up their gang. One of these came up from the Rio Grande last week. He knew your father—was here when he was killed—and Roy was—He saw you some place down there—and recognized Gila Slim as Chuck Renwick. Another man got here day before yesterday. He told them that Gila Slim—*the Arizona Ranger*—was headed for Renwick. He thought you'd get here Friday night. You're a day early—but they're watching for you anyway. And there's a dozen or more of them now. You haven't got a chance against them."

Chuck Renwick's stoop became a little more pronounced. His lips tightened again. He smiled but there was no mirth in it. Fire smoldered in his eyes. "Then I guess I'll need two boxes of shells," he said. "Will you get them for me, please—Janie?"

Tom Wilson tottered over to the counter while Janie was getting the cartridges. He held out his hand. It was thin and clawlike as the foot of a bird and it shook. His eyes were still sunk deep in their sockets but there was some life in them now.

"It's been a hell of a long, hard wait," he said, "and I didn't think you'd make it back—even if you tried. But now that you're here—be careful, son—they're skunk-mean! I'll stick a gun in my pants and wander around wherever you want to go—I can stop one of them from getting you like they got Henry."

Some of the tenseness ran out of Chuck Renwick and he laughed. He took off his slicker and put it on the counter. Breaking open a box of cartridges, he filled the empty loops in his belt. Then he fished a silver badge out of his pocket and pinned it onto his shirtfront.

"You stay right here, Tom, and take care of the store—and Janie," he added slowly. "I'll be wanting both of them in a few days—as soon as I can make Tobe Mason remember where he put the Ten Thousand he took off of my Dad. Where will Craig be now?"

"All of them will be at the *Antler*," Janie replied, "and you'd better stay away from there. If you face them now, you won't need the store—and Dad and me to run it for you."

Chuck grinned at her and turned to Tom Wilson to ask him: "Will you take care of my horse, after

(Continued on page 88)

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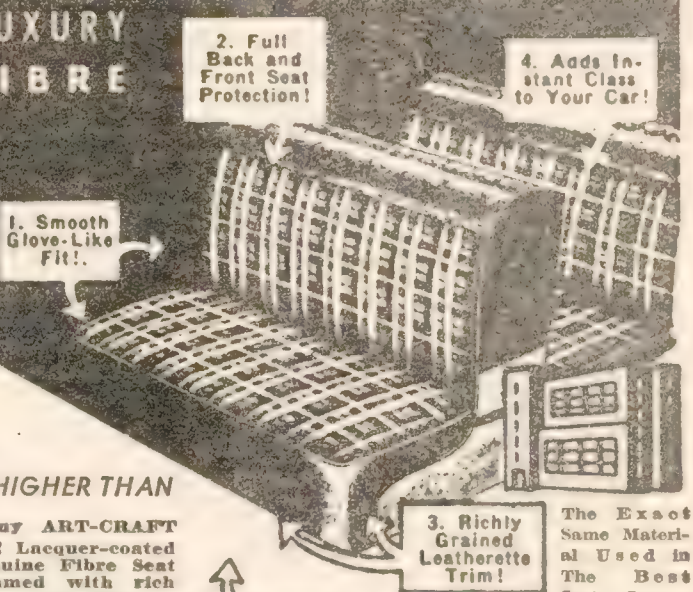
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awhile? He's just about run down."

Wilson nodded. Chuck turned and made for the door. The old man was still standing in his tracks, nodding his head when Chuck went outside and slammed the door behind him. Then he stooped and groped under the counter till he found a scarred belt with a holstered gun on it. He strapped the belt tight around his gaunt waist, took the long barreled gun from its holster and filled it from the box that Chuck had left open on the counter.

JANIE WATCHED while Tom crammed the rest of the shells into his own belt. He did not totter when he went around the end of the counter and clumped to the door. He did not speak. Neither did Janie. The door slammed shut behind him. Janie Wilson's face tightened, her chin squared. She went back to the desk and lifted out a double barreled, ten-gauge shotgun. There was a box of shells on the desk. She took the box. Breaking the gun, she shoved two of the brass ended paper tubes into its thick bore. She snapped the gun back together and stood it by the counter.

Chuck's horse still stood ground-hitched in front of the store. It's head drooped. White lather was drying on its flanks. Janie looked over at the Antler and her glance quickly covered the main street, up and down. Neither Chuck nor her father were in sight. She picked up the bridle reins and led the horse around in back of the store. Janie unsaddled the animal and fed him as quickly as any cowhand could. She was rubbing him down when the first shot sounded, across the street. Three more reports followed in swift succession.

Chuck Renwick shouldered the door open and stepped into the Antler. He stood for a moment, just inside the doorway and his eyes took stock of the room. It was blue with smoke and sour from the fumes of spilled beer and bad whiskey. There were two groups of men in the place. They were about equally divided, a dozen at each end of the long bar. Lon Craig and Tobe Mason were together, at the center of the bar and halfway between the two groups.

Renwick's left hand was splayed on his hip. The right swung carelessly over the gun on his thigh. His big-roweled spurs rattled as he moved slowly across the floor. He stopped ten feet from Lon Craig and faced him. Both of Craig's elbows were on the bar, hands high above his gunbelt. Tobe Mason was not as tall as Craig. His elbows barely came up to the edge of the bar. But he kept his hands well away from the gun he wore under his coat. Renwick ignored Mason. His eyes watched everyone else in the room, but he spoke to Lon Craig.

"Last time you and me played poker, you made a play—Craig—remember it? I'm calling you now—and raising you. I've come home to die—what are you going to do about it?"

Tobe Mason's yellowed face grayed. His eyes darted a quick, questioning glance at the men along the right end of the bar. Lon Craig's black, beady eyes stared at Renwick. They were unblinking as the eyes of a copperhead snake. He hitched his elbows higher onto the bar. The scar on his face twisted his mouth down at the corner. Gritted words came out through his clenched teeth.

"Renwick, when I run you off I told you not to come back. You have. We don't like Rangers here, and we don't like you. Now what do you think I'm goin' to do about it? You've got just ten minutes to leave town. You better use all of it ridin'. I've got ten deputies. Some one of 'em might not like it, me lettin' you go at all. Now git."

Chuck Renwick laughed: "When I see you swinging in front of my store, I'll talk that over with Mason. I'm here to hang you for my brother—and to kill Mason for my Dad. You can take it here, or—"

THE FRONT DOOR banged behind him and a six-gun barked.

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(Continued from page 88)

A man on his right pitched forward onto his face. His gun slid across the floor unfired. Another weasel faced fellow was clawing his iron from the leather. Chuck shot the gun out of his hand. The gun behind him blasted again. Another hard visaged gunman coughed and fell back into the crowd. Chuck shot the man that took his place, before the fellow could drop the hammer on his leveled gun. The rest of the crowd huddled closer together and slowly raised their hands.

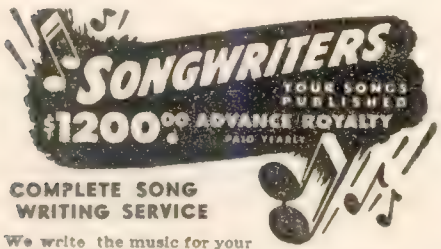
Tobe Mason sagged limp against the bar. Lon Craig stood stiff as a ramrod beside him and did not bat an eye. Old Tom Wilson moved up and stood on Chuck's left. His stringy hair was rumpled. Fire flashed from his sunken eyes. Smoke curled from the barrel of the worn old gun in his hand. There was a spring in his step as he moved toward the gang. His voice was firm and cold as rock.

"Want to gun the rest of 'em now, Chuck?" he asked calmly. Renwick shook his head. His eyes did not waver from Lon Craig's bleak face. "No," he replied. "But pull Craig's fangs before he makes up his mind to use them. Better take Mason's gun too. He might get guts enough to use it, without going around behind a man's back to do it. Step away from the bar, you two." He motioned with his gunbarrel. Craig and Mason obeyed.

Wilson lifted their guns and dropped them butt first into the yawning pockets of his coat. Renwick told the bartender: "Come out from there and line up with the rest of your gang. I'm closing this joint for tonight. I need some sleep. And I'll rest easier with all of you locked in Craig's jailhouse. Drag the hardware from the rest of them, Tom.

WILSON TOOK all the guns and belts and piled them behind the bar. The knot of men at Renwick's left had watched, but no one spoke, or moved. He faced them now. "Boys, the drinks are on Ma-

(Continued on page 90)



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(Continued from page 89)

son, till we get this pack of coyotes in jail. Pick yourselves a bartender, and drink up—but don't break the bottles—or waste any of Tobe's good whiskey. Tom will be back to lock up, as soon as these varmints are comfortable, down the street."

One of the men stepped forward. He was heavy-set, with hands as big as a flapjack. His face was red and whiskered. The graying red hair stood up on his big head like bristles in a scrub-brush. There was ice in his pale blue eyes. Chuck recognized Pat Clancey, the town blacksmith; he had worked on the *Bar R* forge, ten years ago. Clancey's voice was brittle.

"Sure my boy you've picked a job that I'll be glad to help you do—and so will the most of the others here. You'll need four men to watch the jail tonight—two at a time. And I'm your laddy-buck for one of them. Let's get 'em to goin'."

There were eight men besides Craig and Mason on their feet. Three others were on the floor. They did not have to bother with them. Renwick, Wilson, Clancey and another townsman that Chuck did not know, herded the gang out of the saloon. Tom Wilson led the way down the board walk. Clancey and the other man followed Craig's gang. Chuck Renwick walked out in the street and watched them file down the walk. There were only four cells in the jail. Renwick doubled them up—but separated Craig and Mason, placing them in the end cells. When the cell doors were locked, he found the sheriff's gun closet. There were two sawed-off shotguns in it. He loaded them with buckshot shells and gave them to Clancey and his partner.

"I'll have to sleep till midnight," he told Clancey. "I haven't closed my eyes for two days and nights. I'll lie on the cot here in the office—don't worry about noise—I won't hear anything, unless the jail falls down on me. Call me at midnight, when you're ready to go home, Pat."

Tom Wilson objected. "Go over to

(Continued on page 91)

(Continued from page 90)

the store, Chuck. There's a good bed in the hardware room. I sleep there myself, sometimes. I'll stay up tonight—old people don't need as much sleep as you youngsters."

Pat Clancey bristled. "Go on home, the pair of you, and stay there. I can make a night of it as well as not. Your birds will be in their cages here in the morning, Renwick, and you can bet your hat on that. I've herded sheep before this."

Chuck Renwick laughed. "All right, Pat. Come on, Tom; we'll go home. But we'll stop and get a drink first—and we'll send a bottle back for Pat. He'll need it before morning."

THE TOWNSMEN were ready to go home when Renwick and Wilson got back to the saloon. One of them poured another round of drinks. Renwick picked out a bottle that had not been opened. "Will one of you take this over to Clancey?" he asked. A man grinned and held out his hand. "Sure," he said, "I'll do it. Want me to take them a corkscrew and some glasses, too?" Renwick found the corkscrew and gave the man some clean glasses. He hid a yawn behind his hand. "Now, boys," he said, "let's lock her up and go home. We'll open up—on the house again—tomorrow night."

Janie Wilson was sitting on the counter waiting for them. The shotgun was lying across her knees. She put it down and slid off the counter when they came through the door. Now Chuck had a good chance to look longer at her. He took it. Janie certainly was not the awkward slip of a girl that he had known—she was a grown woman—and a very lovely woman, too. The ready shotgun in her slender hands spoke for itself—Janie was not only a beautiful woman but she was nervy enough to suit anybody. Her set, serious face echoed the fact. Chuck grinned his approval. And then she proved that she was a spirited, masterful woman, also.

"Well—don't stand there with

(Continued on page 92)

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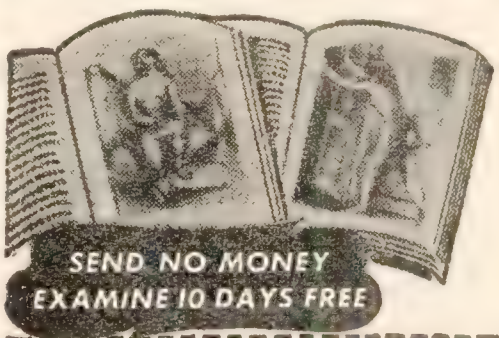

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(Continued From Page 91)

your mouth open, gawking at me," she said tartly. "Get into the end room there, Chuck, and go to bed. You go to bed too, Dad. Both of you look like something the buzzards are waiting for—and it isn't quite ripe enough for them, yet. Go to bed, both of you."

"If I had a wife, and got home tired and hungry as I am, and she didn't offer me something to eat—I'd turn her across my knee—and—" Chuck began, but Janie interrupted him. "Then your wife would scratch your eyes out and put arsenic in your coffee," she said sharply. "Wash your dirty hands, and I'll fix something for you to eat."

The men sat in the kitchen behind the store while she fried ham and eggs for Chuck. Tom didn't want to eat, and he looked tired and weak again. While Janie cooked, and Chuck ate, she questioned them and they told her all that had happened. A worried frown came onto her face. She nodded decidedly.

"I think I'd better take my shotgun over and sit up with Pat Clancey—if he's got a bottle," she said. "Sometimes he forgets and takes two fingers too many."

"He won't do it *tonight*," Tom Wilson said certainly. "He likes this job too well. I'm going to bed. You two had better do the same. I'll be awake at Five, and I'll call you, Chuck."

It was still pitch dark in the room when Renwick woke up. He knew something was wrong before he heard the low mutter of voices, somewhere outside. He had not taken off his pants. He groped in the dark, found his boots and put them on. His gun-belt was on the bed by his pillow. Chuck buckled it around his waist as he went through the store room.

Apparently Tom Wilson and Janie were not awake. Renwick went to a front window and looked out. There was a dark blob in the street in front of the *Antler*. He watched it for a minute while his vision adjusted itself to the dark. He saw a move-

HOME TO DIE

(Continued from page 92)

ment in the blurred mass. Quickly he got back to the counter and picked up Janie's shotgun and the box of shells. He felt the loads in the gun and crammed the rest of the shells into his pants pockets. The short barreled scattergun jutted from his hand when he opened the front door and stealthily slipped out into the street. A dim light shone briefly inside the saloon. Renwick saw the loom of men's heads against the light, the bulk of their shapeless bodies grouped before the doorway. He moved quickly up the street for fifty yards, turned and sprinted to the opposite side.

HE STOOD with his back to a wall until he was certain no one had seen him. Then he inched slowly down the street, side-wise. There was an open space between the buildings, three doors up from the *Antler*. He sidled into the slot and groped his way back to the center of the wall. His feeling hand touched the rail of a ladder and he stopped. Careful to keep the shotgun from striking the rail, he climbed the ladder. A low firewall ran around the roof. He crawled over it and tiptoed across creaking shingles to the front. Leaning out over the wall, he listened. Lon Craig was giving low-voiced orders.

"Three of you go into the *Antler* with Tobe and stay there—put the three stiffs in the back room. Tex, you and Pete go back to the jail and take care of Clancey if he comes to. He'll be hard to handle when he does. Don't waste time on him—shoot him. Six of us will take the store. One man in back and one in the alley can cover the windows. Four of us will go in the front way together. Get a heavy hitchin' post and we'll bust the door down with it. Go in shootin' at ever'thing you see move—don't mind about the gal—she'll be shootin' at us if she gets a chance. Ready now?"

A muttering growl replied. The black knot started breaking apart like a swarm of ants. Renwick shoved

(Continued on page 94)

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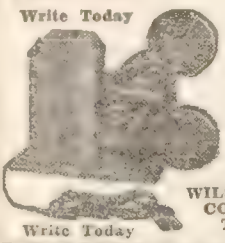

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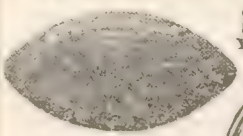

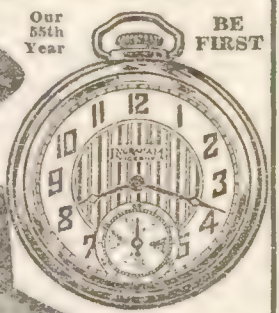

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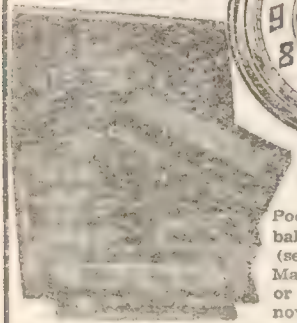

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(Continued from page 93)

the scattergun across the wall and trained its muzzle on the swarm. Yellow flame flashed downward. A bellowing roar echoed along the street. The screams of men followed it. Renwick squeezed the other trigger and the short gun thundered again. He flipped out the empty shells and reloaded. Only one man was running upstreet. Renwick let him have both barrels. He dropped like a pistoled jackrabbit.

A light flared up in the store. Janie came to the front door in a nightgown. Tom Wilson shouldered his way past her and came onto the porch, his bare shan poking down from the tail of a nightshirt. Janie had a rifle, Tom carried the six-shooter. Renwick yelled at them: "Get back into the store and stay there. We've got them on the run now." Wilson came on out onto the porch. "Go to hell!" he snorted. Janie went and stood by him while she echoed his words.

Lights were springing up in the houses all along the street. Men poured out of doors, half clothed but with some sort of a weapon in their hands. Women and children called anxious questions. Men replied shortly, or not at all. There was no sign of Craig, Mason, or their gang. Renwick climbed back down the ladder and went into the street.

Clancey snored fitfully on the cot in the jail office. Renwick shook him. He did not move. "Drunk as a hoot-owl," someone behind Renwick said. He shook his head. "No. Doped. And I furnished the bottle and corkscrew for them to do it."

DAY WAS BREAKING fast. Janie Wilson had put on pants, shirt and boots and she came into the office in time to hear what Chuck said. There was a sound like breaking ice in her voice. "I knew last night that all of you had been drinking. I should have come down here myself, like I wanted to. This wouldn't have happened."

Renwick turned to face her. There was no particular warmth in his own

(Continued on page 95)

tone. But he spoke low enough so nobody else heard.

"Janie, don't you want to go back to the store and get breakfast for Tom and me? Remember—I promised you something, last night." Janie's face colored for an instant. Her lips were pursed for a retort. She left it unuttered. "Yes, sir," she said meekly. "I'm looking forward to *that!* Will ham and eggs do for you this morning?" Renwick pondered the question for a moment. "No," he said. "Make it steak and eggs—I had ham last night."

Twenty men had combed the streets and the buildings along them for two hours. None of Craig's gang had been rooted out. The *Antler* was deserted—except for the three lifeless bodies that had been carted away. There were six more badly wounded men that Renwick had mowed down with the shotgun. Counting the fellow that had gone to the jail with Clancey, and the one that had doped the whiskey bottle, this left Craig, Mason, and four of their owl-hoot gang to account for.

There seemed to be no place left for them to hide. Their horses were still in the barn. They had not left any tracks to show they had walked out of town. This meant they had to be still there, somewhere—but where? Renwick placed men on the tops of buildings and at the ends of every street to watch that nobody sneaked out. The others trooped home to belated breakfasts. Janie put the steaks on the fire when Tom and Chuck came into the store.

"Wash your face too—this time," she said, when Renwick poked his head into the kitchen. "And you might scrub out your mouth with soapsuds while you're at it." The pitch of her voice did not call for any retort. Renwick did not make any.

Tom Wilson and Renwick ate in the midst of a booming silence. It was punctuated by the rattling of pots and pans on the stove. Janie

(Continued On Page 96)

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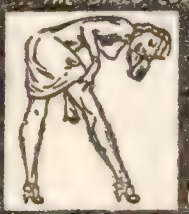

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

(Continued from page 95)

fried a second steak apiece for them and planked the plates down on the table very firmly. Tom's face wore a half grin. Chuck stared into his plate and chewed steak. Janie winked at her father. "Did you think to look under the Ranger's bed?" she asked innocently. "They could have sneaked over here and hid in his room while he was up on the roof wasting my shotgun shells."

Renwick jumped up from the table. His chair went over backwards. He grabbed Janie around the waist, picked her up and planted a quick kiss full on her mouth. "Thanks, sweetheart," he said, and set her feet back on the floor. "You've hit it! Why didn't I think of that before?" He dashed out through the store, buckling on his gunbelt as he ran.

JANIE PICKED up the overturned chair and sat down in it. She rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand and puzzlement was deep in her eyes. Tom Wilson was already on his way out of the kitchen. He grabbed his hat from the counter and trotted after Renwick. Chuck stood on the porch and fired two shots into the air. The street filled rapidly with men running towards the store. Renwick stood out in front of the bank and stopped them. When there was a dozen of them grouped around him, waiting for an explanation, he told them.

"Janie Wilson just guessed the only place we haven't looked—Mason has a vault in the bank. It's big enough to hide thirty men, till they find a chance to sneak out and get away. They could have crossed the street, easy in the darkness, while I was blasting away with the shotgun. That's all they could have done —no place else for them to have hidden. Some of you men watch the back. The rest of us will go in and get them. If the vault is locked, we'll dynamite it. That's where our skunks have holed up."

The bank's front door was locked with a spring lock. Renwick broke

(Continued on page 97)

(Continued from page 96)

the glass with his gunbarrel, reached through and threw the bolt. He went into the bank with eight men at his heels. There was no sign of life inside the vault when he hammered on the door with his gunbarrel. Some of the men behind him grumbled. He silenced them. "Go over to the store and get six sticks of dynamite and a foot of fuse. Bring a can of axle grease too. I'm going to blow this thing open and see what's in it."

He was only halfway through his preparations to blast the vault when a muffled voice came from the inside. It was Mason. "Take the dynamite away," he said. "You'll blow all of us to pieces inside here. I'll release the lock and we'll come out."

The lock clicked and the handle turned outside. Renwick stood outside the door with his foot and shoulder against it. When it had swung open six inches he stopped it. "Throw out all of your guns first," he told them. "Then you come, one at a time so we can search you."

Six guns came sliding through the door. "Is that all?" Renwick asked. "Yes, that's all," Craig snarled. "What in hell do you think that we brought our rifles too?"

Renwick opened the door and one of the hardcases sidled through it. He was searched swiftly and pushed to the back. Another one came, and another, until there were four. Renwick heard Craig and Mason arguing about who would go next. Mason's purpled face appeared in the doorway. Behind him a six-gun roared loud in the vault. He stumbled forward two steps and fell. Renwick threw the door wide open. Craig stood framed in the doorway. His face was pulled down in a sneer. The gun in his hand spat flame, almost into Renwick's face. A half-dozen guns sent hot lead smashing into him. He wilted slowly, buckled at the knees and went down inside the vault.

MASON WAS still breathing. Red froth bubbled from his lips. Garbled words came too. Renwick and Wilson bent over him to listen. His voice was halting and strained... "Craig was boss... Brought me here... Together in Texas Pen'. . . He killed Renwick. . Took his Ten Thousand Dollars. . . Frank never killed anybody—me either . . . We wanted to go away . . . He wouldn't let us—afraid we'd talk. His name wasn't Craig—it was—" Tobias Mason died without telling what Craig's right name had been—or his own.

Back in the kitchen, behind the store—Janie Wilson tried to cook dinner, under difficulties. One of them was her father. He kept popping his head through the kitchen door—to ask if the chuck wasn't ready yet. He winked at Renwick every time he did it. And Janie's other difficulty was Chuck Renwick himself. He had flour in his hair and dough on his face and hands. The way he had got dough on his hands was trying to keep his arms around Janie while she mixed up a batch of biscuits. Heaven only knew how he managed to get his head into the flour barrel. He was trying to get Janie to answer a question. He kept on repeating it:

"Will you marry me tomorrow and go out to the *Bar R* with me to live? I don't like stores. We'll leave Tom here—give him the store. What do you say?"

Finally she had to say yes, or she'd never have got her biscuits into the oven.

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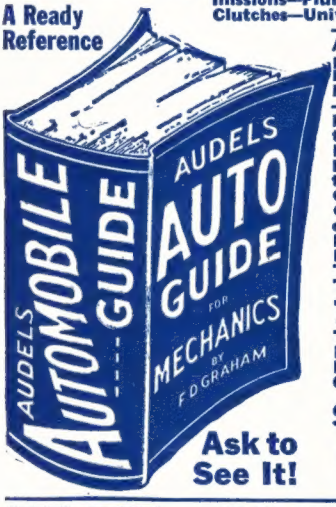

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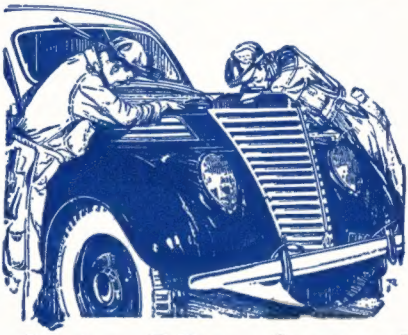

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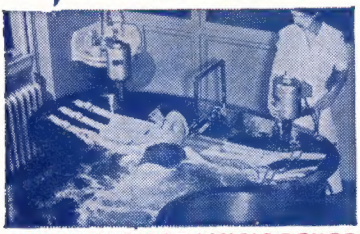

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